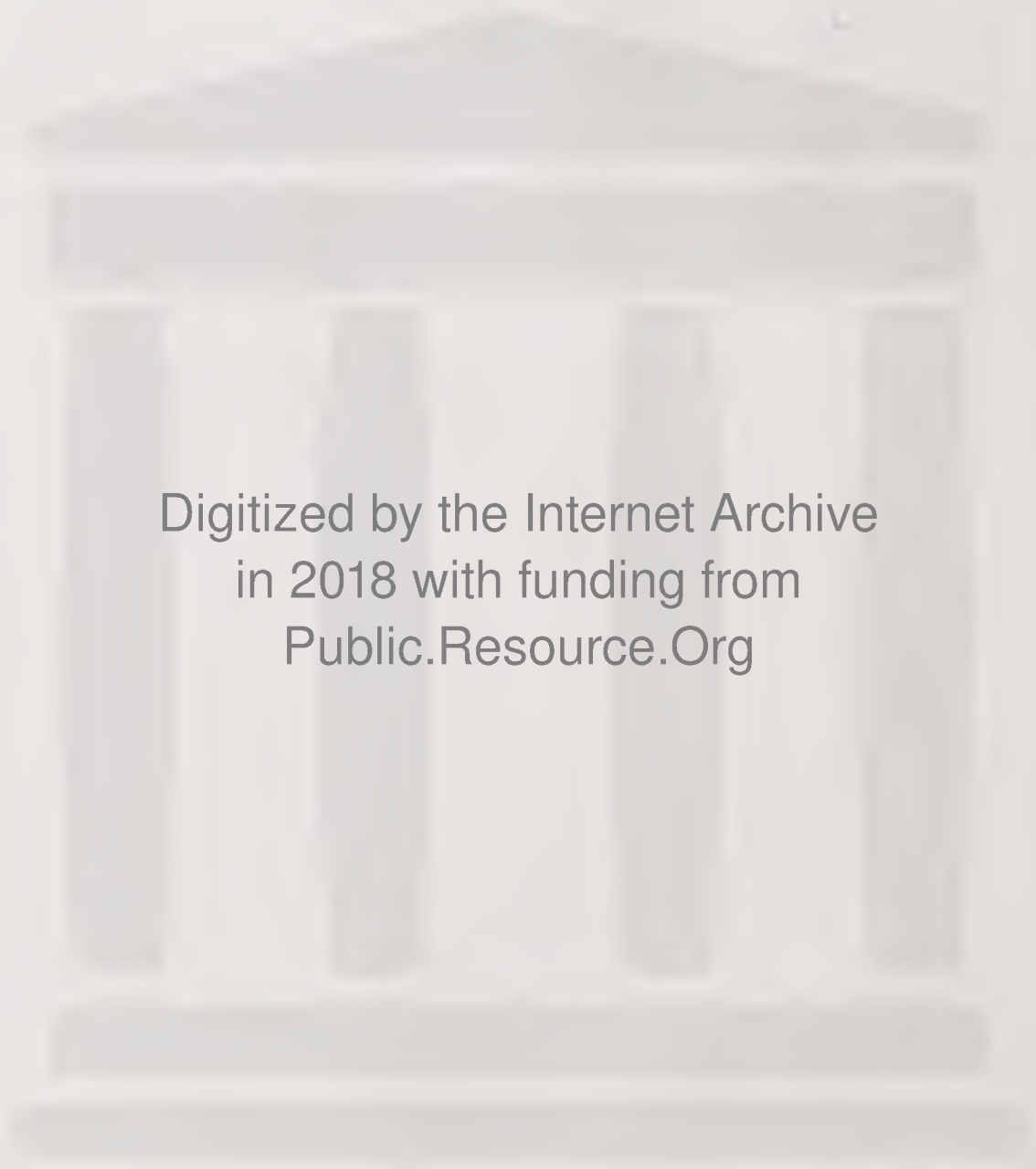


FOLK LEGEND

BHAGABAN SAHU



SUJATA PATNAIK



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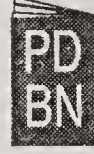
SUJATA PATNAIK



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PREFACE

I feel extremely happy that a full-length biography of the eminent folk-artist and consummate drummer Padmashree Bhagaban Sahu has been attempted. The author Sujata Patnaik has done this excellent, much-needed work.

I have seen Sri Bhagaban Sahu perform with his Narendrapur troupe. I had spoken to him on many occasions too on Ganjam's folk art traditions. His knowledge on the subject was vast and he comprehended all intricate aspects of the various art-forms of that district, more particularly in Danda Nata. His role in setting up the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra of which he became the soul and to which he invited gurus and dance-masters from all over Orissa are now matters of history. Less known is his somewhat humble beginning from a Brahmin family and how his life took a turn when he had a chance encounter with a sage at the Kumbha Mela.

Sri Sahu was never a good student in school. Like many a genius he was a deeply spiritual being. It was his spiritual quest which took him to Himalayas. Returning, to be again a man of the world he learnt Paika Dance, deeply impressed Guru Pankaj Charan as an Odissi dancer but discovered soon that his genius lay in the folk art of the people of his district. Circus show and show-manship of physical prowess were like his spiritual journeys to discover where he belonged, what the best field where he could excel. And excel he did in teaching the illiterate farmer boys the art of various folk dances. The excellence of performance was soon recognized and he was decorated with Sangeet Natak

Academy Award (1974), Tulsi Samman (1984-85), the State Sangeet Academy Award and several other honours. I was extremely happy when Government of India conferred on him the Padmashree. These recognitions he received and his role as a teacher, choreographer or connoisseur of Orissa's folk traditions were no doubt important for the state of Orissa where a person virtually emerging from grass-roots earned the highest honours the state can confer.

But I will never forget his solo drum performance that I enjoyed. The huge drum, slung from the neck of an old man and the way it moved all along with his gyrating movement. The drummer and the drum literally became one. The beat was divine and the sight was for gods to see.

The people of Orissa and all lovers of art and in particular folk-art traditions will indeed be grateful to Ms. Sujata Patnaik who has made considerable efforts to piece together the details of a little-known life for all of us.

Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra.
Bhubaneswar

AUTHOR'S NOTE

*'All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,.....'*

Nothing better, perhaps, than Shakespeare's oft-quoted lines, sums up the protagonist of this real life saga. Bhagaban Sahu, the versatile folk dance and music exponent from Orissa went on to dance into the hearts of millions to become a cult figure in the cultural circles of the country. Born in a remote hamlet, he could traverse thousands of miles away and disseminate his rhythmic, twinkle-toed skills and reverberating drumbeats to the world. But for his incessant efforts to vivify many traditional folk dances of the region, the rich treasures of Ranapa, Ghoomura, Chadheiya, Paika and several other native dances would have faded into oblivion.

Bhagaban Sahu who made it to the topmost echelons of folk art traditions on his own steam, was the torchbearer who single-handedly took it upon himself to showcase south Orissa's kaleidoscopic folk dances to spectators across the globe. In order to accomplish his mission of reviving the near-defunct folk art forms, he set up the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra with indigenous talent picked from the farming community of his village environs. Recognition of his single-minded devotion and

indomitable will to breathe new life into his chosen genre of folk art came in the form of the Central and State Sangeet Natak Academy awards, The Tulsi Samman and other honours. The Padmashree conferred on him by the Government of India in 1992 was another milestone in his life.

However, the contribution of such a self-made genius whose mantra for success was dedication and perseverance has not got the exposure he rightfully deserved, A High School drop-out, Bhagaban Sahu mastered several folk music instruments as well and enthralled his audiences with his oeuvre of folk dances. It is generally believed that nearly five hundred folk dances exist throughout the length and breadth of India today. Of these, only those few that have got wide publicity are familiar with the hoi polloi. Folk dances in all their mirth and gaiety mirror the history, geography, culture and tradition of the place of their origins. When compared to the classical forms, the flexible and spontaneous yet intricate folk dances enjoy a wider following because they are lighter and can easily be improvised to suit any occasion. For long, myriads of folk performances lay neglected in many regions of the country. But the realization that they are precious treasures that reflect the cultural heritage of our country stimulated a handful of dedicated artists to strive relentlessly to preserve these invaluable treasures. In Orissa, Bhagaban Sahu, stands out as a front-ranking dancer, drummer, teacher, choreographer and researcher who totally devoted himself to this cause.

I have, through these pages, endeavoured to encapsulate the various experiences and vicissitudes of life faced by this nonconformist pioneer wedded to his art. Call him a maverick or an activist, a drummer or dancer, an avid disciple or conscientious guru, he succeeded in leaving behind an indelible imprint by dint of his keen acumen and organisational capabilities. Besides having

seen, heard and appreciated the plethora of folk dances and musical scores of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra performers, I have made several visits to Narendrapur and Badakusasthali villages in Orissa, met the artists, friends and family members of the late maestro and gathered interesting details of this one-man institution called Bhagaban Sahu who bid good-bye to life's theatre in August, 2002.

I take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra, a litterateur of international repute and able administrator who has been a fountain head of encouragement to me. He was generous enough to spare some of his valuable time to write the preface of this book. The legendary Bhagaban Sahu's saga of success that I have chronicled is a source of inspiration to many aspiring artists. This book is an earnest attempt to outline the stupendous trajectory taken by this radiant star in the folk art and culture firmament of India.

I am grateful to late Bhagaban Sahu's youngest son Shri Kishor Kumar Sahu and Shri Bighneswar Sahu, his journalist grandson for having supplied me with the relevant material and photographs for documenting the work of the folk icon. No amount of words will suffice to articulate the sense of indebtedness I owe to the Publications Division of the I & B Ministry, Govt. of India. Without their zeal and encouragement, this book wouldn't have reached out to the eclectic connoisseurs of art.

SUJATA PATNAIK

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INITIAL STRIDES

It was a chilly morning in the year 1958. The air in New Delhi, the country's capital was thick with patriotic fervour. Heavily-packed galleries were savouring every moment of the spectacular parade at the Republic Day celebrations. After the immaculate march past of the infantry and cavalry and worthy display of our meritorious military might, it was time for the colourful tableaux to pass through the Rajpath. The spectators lining the entire track greeted the participants from all parts of the country with enthusiasm. When it came to the indigenous folk dancers, the spectacle was nothing short of a riot of colours, pomp and pageantry.

As one impressive group after another passed by the President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, one particular procession of folk dancers became the cynosure of all eyes. Leaping and yelling, they covered the route, performing a highly-charged martial art. Dressed in red dhotis, white kurtas with a red sash and red turbans, brandishing swords with one hand while holding on to a shield in the other, the knights-in-shining-armor danced rhythmically to vociferous drum-beats. "The Paika Dance from Orissa", announced the commentator, as information about this folk dance began reeling forth. The Paika warriors from Orissa were mainly peasants who learnt the art of warfare due to royal diktat. These warriors had to exhibit their valour in front of the Gajapati kings during festive occasions like Dussehra.

Orissa with its hoary history has traditionally been a warring kingdom. It is therefore, but natural for martial arts with drum-based rhythmic dances to find a place in its diverse folk culture. So the Paikas or Padatikas developed their one-time occupation into a folk dance with all its martial ferocity; its rhythmic steps falling in line with the reverberating beats of drums, clarinets, cymbals and conch shells.

That this captivating folk dance was greeted with thunderous applause was evident. Not Just the dance, the spectators were mesmerised by the meticulous beats of the 'dhol'. The turbaned drummer, coming up at the rear of the 'Paika' dancers provided the impetus required to elevate the subtle foot-work and swift arm movements of the dancers. So engrossed was the man in beating the 'dhol' and whirling it around, jumping high up that there was little doubt that he was the leader of the ensemble and was in absolute command of the entire performance.

When the 'Paika' dance bagged the coveted President's medal for the best folk dance, the leader of the troupe, Bhagaban Sahu went forward to receive it from President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad amidst a continuous roar of applause. This was the first major event the male dancers from Narendrapur in Orissa had participated in and they had walked away with the topmost honours !

No sooner did the initial flush of excitement die down than Bhagaban Sahu, the founder and leader of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra raised both his hands in salutation. The group of 25 dancers listened raptly as the leader, overwhelmed with emotion said, "I owe all this to God and my gurus who trained me wholeheartedly for this august ceremony in the nation's capital,"

In August 1957, when the then Law, Education and Home Minister of Orissa Shri Lingaraj Panigrahy visited the

Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra in Ganjam District of Orissa, Bhagaban Sahu was immersed in imbibing the intricate steps of Odissi, the graceful and lyrical classical dance of Orissa, But the Minister, detecting a spark of genius in him was engrossed in some other thoughts. Would Bhagaban Sahu, the devoted dancer and choreographer represent Orissa at the Republic Day pageant in Delhi ? But, he emphasised, not as a classical dancer. If at all there was an avenue, it was only through folk dance. It didn't take long for Bhagaban, the naive, dexterous master to acquiesce.

January 1958 was not far off. With hectic planning and preparation ahead there wasn't much time for rigorous practice. At the behest of the Law Minister, eminent dramatist Karthik Ghosh came down from Cuttack in November to fine tune the troupe's performance for 'Paika Nacha', the traditional warrior dance of Orissa, Young, talented peasant boys hailing from Badakusasthali and Narendrapur villages in Ganjam district were undergoing training at the local centre for performing arts, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra.

The 44 year old, sturdy and dynamic founder-secretary cum group leader, Bhagaban Sahu took it upon himself to play the drum on that red-letter day. That he was proficient in beating the 'dhol' went without saying. But the urge to attain perfection in playing the percussion instrument was so strong in the creative artist that he took an unprecedented step in this direction. Before delving further into this episode a small introduction about folk dances prevalent in Orissa becomes imperative here. Folk dances trace their origins to a common cultural heritage among the people living in homogenous groups. Based chiefly on the oral tradition, the customs and rituals of the common masses become a part of folklore and get reflected in dances and songs of that particular region.

Dance, of all performing arts, is probably one of the oldest forms of expression of human joys and sorrows. Routine functions of daily life in villages like sowing, transplanting and harvesting form the basis of these expressions just as births, marriages, love, separation and festivity do. Collective dancing with a plethora of styles and themes is the mainstay of folk dance which enhances the 'spontaneous overflowing of emotions'. Thematically, folk dances can be categorised as religion or ritual-oriented, nature-based, farming, hunting or war-oriented. Most folk traditions survive on their themes from the two Indian epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Woven into a rich tapestry of rhythmic patterns and vibrant hues, the folk dances of Orissa mirror the traditional culture and religious mores of the local communities. Unlike the classical dance forms which besides being traditional seem rather puritanical in form and style, folk dances are more unrestrained and spontaneous in their expression of sentiments and emotions. 'Lok Nritya' or folk dances are not bound by rules and principles detailed in text books or classics like that of classical dance forms.

The distinctive styles of music and dance evolved over centuries of dedication and practice continued unabated during the reign of Orissan Kings. Thanks to royal patronage, folk art and culture not only survived the onslaughts of time and tastes but managed to reach dizzying heights of popularity. During the early decades of the 20th century bereft of royal support, folk arts began to be sidelined. With the changing political and social scenario in the country, there was a lull in the performing arts. However, after independence, state patronage and involvement of cultural associations have provided the requisite shot in the arm for folk dances. Pioneering work by some dedicated artists and gurus in this direction has contributed greatly to the revival of several

forms of folk dance and music.

Some of the popular folk dances of Orissa performed in the 30 districts of the state are Paika Nacha, Basarkeli, Dalkhai, Ghoomura, Chaiti Ghoda, Kela Keluni, Jhumar etc. Sometimes the same dance is followed in a different region in a slightly varied style. Inter-region, inter-community influences in the folk forms are as common as are the tribal-origins of some of them, Orissa's Ganjam district, with its rich and hoary cultural heritage is liberally endowed with a kaleidoscope of vibrant folk dramas and dances like Prahalad Natak, Danda Nata, Animal Mask Dance, Daskathia, Kothi Sola Gahana Dance, Radha Premleela, Ranapa Dance and the puppet dance known as Kandhei Nata, A galaxy of poets and litterateurs from Southern Orissa has enriched the cultural firmament of the state by contributing immortal melodies and lyrical verses for posterity, Kavisamarat Upendra Bhanja's oeuvre of romantic poems in 'Labanyavati', 'Kotibrahmanda Sundari' and 'Vaidehisha Vilas' are sung to melodious tunes, to this day. Kavi Surya Baladeva Ratha's Radha-Krishna love lores are as popular as Bhakta Kabi Gopal Krushna Patnaik's Odissi numbers on their divine love. For generations, people have been exposed to the rich and vibrant poetic genius of these masters and their creations have become part of folklore.

Bhagaban Sahu, an outstanding folk dancer and drummer of repute had single-handedly striven to nurture the folk dances of Paika, Ranapa, Ghoomura, Chadheiya, Beenakar, Laudi, Bagh Nach and others and elevated them to the status of an aesthetic art form suitable for stage presentation. Traditional folk music instruments like the Sankha, Mahuri, Dhol, Jhanja too got a new lease of life due to his relentless crusading efforts.

Though he stayed rooted to his village Badakusasthali, near

Narendrapur, throughout his life, his vision was global and he put the name of his obscure hamlet on the folk dance map of the world. No mean feat, this.

QUEST FOR DIVINITY

1 914 - The outbreak of the First World War soon after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria on June 28 created a major upheaval in the world scenario.

The war had in no way affected life in a remote village in Orissa, India, where the monotonous routine continued unabated. However, on September 21st, 1914 there was jubilation all around when a baby boy was born to Binayak Sahu and Seeta Devi. It was a Monday, the day of Lord Shiva of the Hindu pantheon. So Binayak, a landed peasant affectionately named his new-born son, Bhagaban. The booming sounds of the distant guns and war cries perhaps echoed all around and infused in the infant, a martial spirit, albeit of a different sort. For, years later, this baby, born in Badakusasthali, a small hamlet adjoining Narendrapur near the silk city of Berhampur in Southern Orissa's Ganjam District was to grow up into a sturdy, brave youth and popularise Paika Nrutya, a war-oriented folk dance, performed by warrior farmers of the Gajapati Kings.

The tranquil atmosphere of the village pond, the sublime, the groves nearby, the temple and the flora and fauna began to exercise a magnetic pull on him and this attachment to his tiny village of landed peasantry, was to last a lifetime, Bhagaban's father, a god-fearing, devout Brahmin farmer possessed about 50 acres of fertile, cultivable land. Years ago, Binayak Sahu was member of the Taluka Board under the British Government. Later

on, all his energies were directed towards farming.

Binayak's first wife had passed away after giving birth to two sons. He then married Sita Devi and their first son was Gobind Sahu. Bhagaban, their second son was the blue-eyed boy of the entire family, Gandhiji's return from South Africa to India in January 1915 or Tilak's nationwide movement for securing Home Rule or Swaraj in 1916 had little significance for this man. But when an astrologer read the birth chart of his second son, he predicted, "The boy's planetary position indicates he will be remarkably famous and come in contact with many great personalities." To the rustic father this sounded exciting yet incredible. Nevertheless, at an early age, he sent his son, Bhagaban to an elementary school, 'Chatasala' in front of his house. Then the boy studied at another school a few kilometres away at Dura, Like most boys of his age, Bhagaban too didn't enjoy going to school. The village games, colourful fairs and festivals attracted his childish fancy more than anything else. Even as a child, he participated in Sankirtans often. As a ten-year old, the Prahalad Natak and other mythological plays of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata enacted by the village actors captivated him and he began to pick up the nuances of the body gestures, dialogue delivery and speech intonation of the motley characters.

Fearing his wayward movements, his father sent him to a bigger town, Chhatrapur for his High School education. It was about 10 miles away from Narendrapur, Instead of staying in the town, Bhagaban stayed at a Hanuman Temple situated in Kumarabegapally on the outskirts of Chhatrapur. A sizeable distance through green foliage had to be covered on foot to reach the Onslow Institution, one of the oldest schools in the state set up by the British in 1855.

More than the school and his teachers, it was the idol of Lord

Hanuman and the priest there that moulded his thought processes and inculcated a profound sense of moral values in him. These formative years of worshipping Lord Hanuman, the strong and powerful monkey-god proved to be a stepping stone to reach his goal of performing brawny feats later on.

Hardly had he approached his twelfth year when he lost his father, an authoritative but benign influence on his life. Left with three older brothers, one younger brother Parsuram, two sisters, Bhama and Bimala and a mother draped in a widow's whites, Bhagaban tried to forget his grief by turning to prayers. Although his schooling continued uninterrupted till the third form or the eighth grade, he found actual fulfilment in observing various types of plays, opera performances and mono-acting scenes. He even went to Berhampur, a nearby major town to participate in folk dances which led to his setting up of an amateur theatre group to perform plays. He ate and even relished non-vegetarian fare as is common among Brahmin families of Orissa and Bengal, But on auspicious days like Ekadasi, Sankranti, Mondays and the sacred month of Kartik, he ate vegetarian fare or religiously observed a fast.

When his younger brother Parsuram who was in the village school was caned by his teacher for playing pranks, Bhagaban raised a storm of protest. He rushed to the teacher and blurted out whatever came into his disgruntled head. The teacher, while defending himself, obviously reprimanded Bhagaban instead. This convinced Bhagaban that it wasn't worth going to school anymore. In protest, he left school at Chhatrapur on a whim, in disgust, never to step in again. But this was one decision he regretted and could never exculpate himself till his death. That he had been extremely brash and discourteous to the teacher, senior to him by years haunted him no end. However, this unsavoury incident taught him a great lesson:

The teacher or guru is worthy of worship, 'Acharya Devo Bhava', The shishya or disciple who yearns for knowledge should always be humble or else true learning will elude him.

The school dropout, after much debate, concluded that academics was not his cup of tea. He returned to his village Badakusasthali. But the few years of his sojourn at the Hanuman Temple left a deep impact on his impressionable mind. He began to detect a spark of divinity in stones, rocks and cliffs, trees and streams, air and fire. The frequency of his visits to the Radhakrishna temple in the village began to increase rapidly.

Bhagaban's mother and uncles observed his mysterious behaviour, strange for his tender age. The young lad appeared to be searching for something. He didn't evince any interest in his friends, fairs or festivals. Seeing him lost in deep contemplation, his mother once asked him why he kept brooding all the time. A few moments of silence passed by. Bhagaban's philosophic answer startled her, "I'm in search of truth, the eternal truth." Regaining her composure, Sita Devi, the mother simply patted her son affectionately on the back. He was growing up and it was high time he got locked up in matrimony. The earlier the better. Perhaps, he would become worldly wise and get over his spiritual quest. Hailing from a conservative Brahmin family, Sita Devi prayed to Lord Jagannath. "Oh, the Round-Eyed one, 'Chaka Akhi', please bestow all happiness on my son."

As was the custom in those days, Bhagaban had an early marriage when he was eighteen. Kautuki Sabat of the neighbouring village Hathapur, near Purushottampur was the beautiful bride, about two-three years younger to him. She was the quiet, submissive sort who got along well with the rest of the family members. It was not long before she gave birth to a

daughter, Hema. Even after becoming a father, Bhagaban seemed to struggle from within. His spiritual quest couldn't be satiated and he grew extremely restless. Like Gautama Buddha, would he relinquish his wife, child and other members of the family to seek salvation? The distant Himalayan slopes, the mighty Ganga and all the Gods of the Hindu pantheon seemed to beckon him. Question after question crowded his turbulent mind. How could he unravel the mysteries of the universe? His early years at the Hanuman Mandir near Chatrapur marked the beginning of his phenomenal quest for the unknown. But he realised that he couldn't gratify his soul's needs by staying in the rustic environs of the hamlet. He needed a guru, a guide who could quench his thirst for knowledge. In his search for spiritual edification, Bhagaban finally ran away from home, landing in the famous pilgrim town of Haridwar. Moving in the company of saints and savants, he found contentment. But not for long. Short trips to Rishikesh, Mathura, Brindavan, Benaras and Allahabad followed before he returned home to Badakusasthali, completely disenchanted.

As householder, Bhagaban got involved in the nitty gritty of everyday life. But he was far from happy. His restive spirit virtually dragged him to obscure as well as familiar places of pilgrimage. So frequently he travelled to Haridwar, Rishikesh, Mathura and Benares that he learnt the name of each and every 'Math' there. He also picked up a smattering of Hindi and Bengali during these peripetatic trips. During a pilgrimage to the Kumbha Mela at Allahabad, he witnessed a mammoth crowd watching with baited breath, a person riding a motorcycle inside a huge ditch bordered by wooden planks. The deafening sounds and the dangerous curves, the hazardous ups and downs within the 'well' kept the onlookers on tenterhooks. Bhagaban was greatly impressed with the show which triggered a chain of reactions in

him. He befriended the African group running the risky stunt and learnt the details of the death-defying act, even managing to elicit from them the measurements of the well. Soaked in unprecedented enthusiasm and a burning desire to replicate the act, Bhagaban landed at Puri.

His first mission was to build up a muscular physique, a brawny body to undertake such a phenomenal risk. He joined a gymnasium in Puri and trained intensively under the watchful eyes of Radhasyam Das. Rigorous exercise, accompanied by a tenacious will to gain mastery over his physique galvanised him into experimenting with daring feats. He learnt to ride a cycle, then a motorcycle with amazing swiftness.

Back at Narendrapur, he started dabbling in hitherto unknown acts of courage like stopping a motor car in motion by flexing his muscles, bending iron crowbars with bare hands and pulling, pushing or lifting heavy objects. But these feats were rather too facile, fit to be performed at an 'akhada', he felt. He was determined to put to practice what he'd doggedly set out to do. Like one possessed, the intrepid Hercules got a huge ditch, 85ft in circumference and 16ft deep dug near the open ground at his village and outlined it with wooden planks. Against the will of his family, he bought a motorcycle for himself and began practising to ride inside 'Maut ka kuan' or the 'Well of Death'. Bringing experts from Kolkata and learning the art of construction proved an expensive affair. In those days the cost of the entire project came to a whopping Rs 12,000 Nobody dare oppose him for the simple reason that he was extremely self-willed and stubborn in such matters. Not one to allow fear to overpower him, the god-fearing Bhagaban proved he could, by virtue of his indomitable will, achieve what he inexorably strove for.

To the awestruck villagers, this death-defying spectacle of a man riding a motorcycle at high speed on a perpendicular wall of a round well was unbelievable, stupendous to the hilt. Bhagaban then decided to start a circus of his own and exhibit his high-adrenaline, dare-devil stunts at other places in the state. That was the time when affluent zamindar families patronised talented artists and acrobats and heaped them with rich rewards in cash and kind.

Younger brother Parsuram too began to accompany Bhagaban. Small groups of boys from the village were trained in acrobatics to perform at the circus. Tickets for the circus were printed in three languages- Oriya, Telugu and English. The rates were fixed at one rupee two annas for the Reserved class and nine annas each for the gallery. This was inclusive of tax. Hailed as 'The Wonder of Orissa', 'A rare feat in India', the motorcycle feat in the 'Well of Death', allured spectators. People, young and old thronged the shows with alacrity. Special shows for women were held at 5 p.m., before it could get too late. At places, the performances for students and teachers were held at 6.30 in the evening.

Wherever Bhagaban performed, he was applauded for his courageous and perilous antics and hailed as a sensation, a hero. The thunderous applause of spectators acted as a catalyst, reinforcing his resolve to continue one show after another. His family and relatives kept pressurising him to put a stop to the appalling life-threatening tricks. But the young hero, heady with the taste of new success, did not relent. He took his circus troupe to Cuttack, Nayagarh, Puri, Kendrapara besides the nearby town of Berhampur. Entertaining the people, despite jeopardising his own life became an obsession for Bhagaban. The laudatory cheers were, however, cruelly brought to an abrupt end at the holy

town of Puri. An unexpected, devastating cyclone proved to be his nemesis when it suddenly ravaged the entire circus, causing irreparable loss to the entire unit. Dejected and disconsolate, Bhagaban Sahu's nerves gave in as he broke down, crestfallen. Along with other boys of his team, he returned home, his morale shattered beyond repair.

A SAINT'S PROPHECY

The primary concern now was the repayment of the loans incurred during the circus disaster. Bhagaban approached his elder brother Gourahari Sahu to bail him out by selling some of the ancestral land, "Promise me you will leave the circus once for all", admonished the brother, "only then can you get the money," The eldest brother and relatives desired that he stay rooted in the village itself.

Bhagaban was in a fix. As it is, the debacle at Puri was a severe jolt, On top of it, his parochial family was pestering him to put an end to his obsessive passion. Days and days of sulking, deep meditation and brooding followed. It took Bhagaban ten long days to give his brother his word- a promise to give up the circus for good. If on one side there was relief that the creditors got back their money, on the other there was intense, unfathomable grief. Frustrated at the turn of events, Bhagaban left home again for the lofty Himalayas, He was going neither to seek solace nor soothe his frayed nerves. He had firmly resolved to give up everything and become a 'Sanyasi' forever.

Wandering at the foothills of the mighty mountain ranges, in a bid to renounce the world, Bhagaban fortuitously came across a Naga sadhu. Falling at the feet of the sage, Bhagaban implored, "Please make me your disciple, guruji," The sadhu scanned Bhagaban from top to toe, smiled benevolently and enunciated, "Your face radiates an inexplicable charm. You are destined to leave your mark in the world. But, not as an ascetic. You can attain

‘moksha’ mind you, not through renunciation but by leading the life of a ‘grihast’ (family man) and following your true vocation. Go back, my boy.”

So earnest were the outpourings of the Naga Sadhu that Bhagaban remained tongue-tied. His earlier plans to relinquish the world went awry. Accepting the blessings of the unknown seer, Bhagaban traced back his steps, an uncertain future looming large over his mind.

The prophetic words of the learned saint heralded a new beginning in Bhagaban’s life. Now in his late twenties, he took it upon himself to decide his future course of action. His overriding interest in music, dance and drama enabled him to devote all his energies in that direction.

Even as a child, the chirping of birds, the buzz of butterflies, the gurgling sounds of rivulets, the wheezing winds and rustling of leaves sounded like music to his ears. The entire village, with its repertoire of motley folk songs and dances on varied themes like love, marriage, harvesting, birth and death, exerted a profound influence on his subtle, sensitive mind. The dance-drama opera parties or *natak mandalis* that often culled their themes from folklore shaped his aesthetic sensibilities and left an indelible impact on his mental frame. With generations of village folk involved in operas, it was but natural for Bhagaban to inherit this love for the performing arts. Early on, he had played the parts of historical and mythological characters like Kartaveerya, Kalapahad, Sambareswara with gusto in the open-air, idyllic environs of his village. He would dash off to places where fairs would be held in which shows of Prahalad Natak, Sakhi Mata would be performed.

The neighbouring town of Berhampur hosted the ‘Thakurani Jatra’, a fair in honour of the presiding, local deity once in two



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A publicity poster advertising daredevil motorcycle feat of Bhagaban Sahu in the 'Death Well'

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Sample of a poster advertising
Bhagaban Sahu's performance abroad



A profile of Bhagaban Sahu in traditional folk dance costume holding his 'dhol'



Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra's dancers with Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru after their Chadheiya dance performance at the Republic Day Parade in 1961. Bhagaban Sahu is also seen in the last row (standing 3rd from right) with his 'dhol'.



Ghoomura dance performance in village

years. During this 3-week period of joyous celebration, the townsfolk, in a bid to appease the deity would worship Her. It was in Her power to ward off cholera and other hazardous diseases. People whose prayers were answered would often try to propitiate the deity by impersonating as Gods. Wearing colourful garbs of different characters like Shrikrishna or even man-eating vampires used to add a riot of colour to the celebration. A festive spirit would permeate the entire atmosphere as crowds mingled about and had their share of fun and frolic. Bhagaban, as a child dressed himself as a Saura tribal, a Naga youth and a milkman at different times and danced in the famous Silk City during the fairs.

Given his eloquent flair for dialogue delivery alongwith a body language that spoke volumes for the characters he enacted, Bhagaban gained a fan following in his village. He managed to convince other young boys from farming families to join him and thus set up a small, amateur theatre group. Mock rehearsals, improvisations and innovative styles were the hallmarks of these young opera performers as they honed their uncanny skills. Traditional musical instruments like the conch shell or *shankh*, 'changu', clarinet, bells were used in the orchestra. Bhagaban evinced an interest now to master them. He sat in the temple for long hours and during kirtans and bhajans he blew the conch for continuous spells.

The conchshell or *shankha* is indispensable on all auspicious occasions in Orissa, Blowing the shell is an art which requires control over one's breath. During festivals, religious occasions, daily prayer rituals, marriages and other festivities, the sounds emanating from the conch herald good tidings. Over a period of time, Bhagaban trained his artists in blowing not one but two conch shells at the same time for continuous spells. A small group of boys, attired in colourful traditional garb would perform balancing tricks,

acrobatics and gymnastics while uninterruptedly blowing conch shells. Known as 'Shankhadhwani', the performance bears Bhagaban's unmistakable stamp with his circus moorings.

Bhagaban next sought the services of a mentor who could give him a systematic training and channelise his talents in the right direction. So intense was his desire to preserve and perpetuate the sinking folk dances of his region that he rushed with redoubled vigour to the formidable Guru Koyira Nayak, imploring him to take him under his umbrage. Gone were the bohemian ways of yore. By now, he had become the father of one son, Rabindranath, born in 1944 almost eleven years after Hema, his daughter. Wife Kautuki never protested or nagged about his disinterest in family affairs. As a dutiful daughter-in-law she was engrossed in keeping house and raising the children.

Bitten by the song and dance bug, Bhagaban would rush to places wherever folk-plays, native dances or 'jatra' parties would take place, 'Danda Nata', an ancient, indigenous form of folk-theatre in which only men would participate was performed during the month of Chaitra (March-April) in various districts of Orissa. So Bhagaban would witness the folk-play at Berhampur, Balangir, Sambalpur, Puri or Phulbani every year.

With a slight variation in the performances in different districts, Danda Nata, by and large, is an amalgam of Tantric Buddhism and Tantric Shaivism. In the votive dance to propitiate Lord Shiva, the devotees inflict punishment on themselves and the severe form of penance brought about through fasting, dance and austerities goes on either for 13 or 21 days. There are many kinds of characters who are presented in the Danda Nata- The Sutradhar or Pata Bhokta, Sapua Kela-Keluni or the Snake charmer and his wife, Sabara-Sabaruni or the hunter and his consort, the Chadheiya-Chadheyani or the bird catcher and his partner.

In the performance of all those dance-dramas, a medley of folk musical instruments are used as accompaniments to bring about the desired effect in rhythm and expression of emotions. Bhagaban's keen perception and deep insight into the varied form of Danda Nata motivated him to present the Chadheiya dance among other things so as to present it within the confines of an auditorium, if necessary.

Not one to learn anything on a superficial plane, Bhagaban put his heart and soul into imbibing the intricacies of the steps and rhythmic beats of this tribal item. As per the tradition, Chadheiyas are bird catchers who dwell in forests and sell birds for their livelihood. In the Chadheiya dance, each dancer holds a pole (danda) with a phasa (bait) and enters the dance arena. Attired in red shorts with white-borders, red turbans with a tuft of plumes stuffed in at a corner, two strands of white-beads crisscrossing across the chest, the dancers present a colourful and captivating sight. Extracted from the original Danda Nata, the Chadheiya dance perfected by Bhagaban Sahu throbs and vibrates with pulsating rhythms of drums, conch shells, and 'Mahuri'. Bhagaban, with his masterful improvisational dexterity, himself trained the group of dancers and led them to the stage, playing on the 'dhol'. The Chadheiyas in their alluring embellishments would follow and whirl vigorously, their movements synchronising with the accompanying folk orchestra.

Binakar is also another folk dance associated with Danda Nata. The dancer holds a Bina-like staff with tiny jingling bells attached to it and dances to the accompaniment of 'dhol'. The colourful garb of the Binakar and the drummer are as much a feast to the eye as are the songs invoking Lord Shiva and goddess Parvati. Enamoured of this lucid dance form, Bhagaban decided to adapt it for performing on stage.

Any dance sans music is not conceivable. So Bhagaban decided to learn to play on some musical instruments. He mastered the art of playing the 'dhol' (the drum) a percussion instrument used in folk music. The 'dhol' is an ancient percussion instrument made of the trunk of a tree. The hollow, cylindrical wood is strengthened by cowdung plaster and made into a barrel-shaped wooden drum. Animal hides, often of goat-skin are used for playing on both sides of the drum. Holding it horizontally, the drummer generally uses a stick to beat the leather on one side and his palm and fingers to beat the other side. Continuous beating causes high-pitch musical notes suitable to create the rhythmic, mesmerizing effect on the dancers. The 'dhol' is used in most folk dances as a solo accompaniment as also in combination with the clarinet, conch, bells and other percussion instruments. Bhagaban also began to dabble with the 'mrudanga' and 'Nishan', and other percussion instruments used in folk music. He also tried to create fusion orchestra by combining Panchbadya- 'Dhol' (drum), 'Shankha' (conch), 'Mahuri' (clarinet), 'Ghanta' (bells) and 'Jhanja' (cymbals).

But Bhagaban faced the music when his uncles and relatives heard of his unconventional behaviour of playing the drums. Hides of animals were used in most of the percussion instruments and it was disgraceful for a man from a Brahmin family to handle such instruments. In the early fifties distinction in society based on caste was widely prevalent in India and Orissa was no exception. Custom dictated that only men from the so called lower castes like Haddi, Bauri and Dandasi community play on the leather-patched drums. A Brahmin ought not to even think of touching these taboo items.

BIRTH OF AN ORGANISATION

With the formation of the State of Orissa on April 1, 1936, the leading personalities of the newly formed State exhorted the masses to become conscious of their rich heritage and traditions so as to regain the ancient glory of Utkal or Kalinga. Through song and dance, drama and literature, the inherent Oriya pride became evident, as it were. Bhagaban Sahu, ever conscious of rich heritage of Orissa, now felt it was high time he learnt the classical dance Odissi. For this, he needed a genuine guru to train him. A few months earlier he had picked up the nuances of Bharatnatyam from a classical dancer at Berhampur. But a chance viewing of Odissi dance inspired him to make up his mind.

At that time, Odissi was passing through a phase of gradual revival. Though the pristine dance form dates back to the 2nd century B.C., the present Odissi owes its origin to the 'Devadasi' cult. Devadasis or Maharis performed in front of Lord Jagannath at the Puri temple. From temples, Odissi began to be performed in the royal palaces. Towards the end of the 16th century, during king Ramachandra Deva's (king of Khurda) reign, young boys dressed as girls popularised Odissi under the guise of 'Gotipua Nrūtya'. Some scholars believe this practice was nothing but the influence of Vaishnavism. The classical dance Odissi, with its songs by Jayadev, Upendra Bhanja, Banamali, Baldev Ratha, etc. became accessible to the masses. However, with the loss of royal patronage a century later, and the influence and pressures of foreign yoke, it slowly began to sink into oblivion. A temporary

hiatus didn't sound the death-knell of the dance though, as it was vibrantly alive in the exquisite temple sculptures and friezes of sculpturesque poses. In 1936 when the state was formed, some young talented boys began perfecting the 'bhangis' or 'steppings'-the single hand and double hand gestures associated with the dance. Among them, the most popular was Guru Pankaj Charan Das. Younger in age to Bhagaban Sahu by more than ten years, Guru Pankaj Charan Das was a dedicated artist who worked relentlessly to impart the nuances of the dance to young learners. Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra was his renowned disciple. Bhagaban Sahu implored Guru Pankaj Das to become his teacher and come down to Narendrapur for a couple of months initially.

Traditional to the core Bhagaban offered *Guru Dakshina* and prostrated at the feet of Guru Pankaj Das though the teacher was younger than him by a decade. An intent learner, Bhagaban started learning Odissi in all earnest. He learnt the various 'mudras', the 'bhangis', eight varieties of 'chali', other essential facial gestures and body postures that are part of Odissi performance. The guru was highly impressed by the dedication of his pupil.

He went ahead and taught Bhagaban the Mangalacharan-the prelude to a performance when the performer invokes the blessings of all gods. Next was the 'Batu' where a uniform speed is maintained in the 'bhangis' and *tandava* poses predominate during the performance. This is followed by 'Pallavi' which is elaborate, faster-paced in its display of intricate rhythmic patterns of 'Lasya' style.

Rigorous training and persistent practice continued not for days or weeks but months together. Such was the zeal of Bhagaban that he would continue his pursuit uninterrupted till he gained perfection in the art. His sturdy body grew supple and flexible. He then came to the intricate part called 'Abhinaya'

where facial expressions denoting 'bhava' or feelings are mastered. A whole gamut of human emotions are brought into play by the performer, conveying the heterogeneous moods of the situation in 'Abhinaya'. Months turned to years and then came the most exacting part of the dance called 'Moksha', This is traditionally the concluding dance that ends with a prayer for peace. 'Moksha' is thus a dance of salvation.

The technique of this ritual temple dance with its 'Tribhangis' involving the three body parts of head, bust and torso where the emphasis is on the torso and the hips move from side to side is rather difficult to execute. Bhagaban's circus exploits probably stood him in good stead while learning Odissi. The psyche of an acrobat imbued in him the tenacity and stamina essential for strenuous dance practice.

The Guru-Shishya relationship continued for years together. Guru Pankaj Das would come at regular intervals, stay for a few weeks, brush up Bhagaban's style of dance and then leave. So, it wasn't long before Bhagaban picked up complicated pieces like the Dasavatar (with lyrics of Jayadev) 'Madhurashtakam', Sivashtakam and Mohini Bhasmasur. While he rehearsed for 5-6 years diligently, he also began to teach some of the boys in the village too. In his group was Surendranath Das, the son of a school teacher who'd spent some years with Bhagaban Sahu, participating in dance performances with him.

Das suggested that in order to gain recognition and perform at various places, a registered organisation was essential. At that time Cuttack was the only important town in Orissa with a Kala Vikas Kendra. Hectic parleys with other artists and gurus began for Bhagaban in earnest. All these culminated in setting up the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra on 2nd October 1954 with Bhagaban Sahu as its founder. The aim of establishing the Kala

Vikash Kendra was to revive the invaluable treasures of folk dance and music around Ganjam District which, over a period of time, had almost faded into the oblivion.

Bhagaban intensified his scouting for young boys of the village to start training them early on. Besides attending their regular school, the boys were engrossed in learning various types of dances and playing a plethora of folk musical instruments. At that time, young girls joining the institute tantamounted to social stigma. No parent could imagine sending their daughter to learn dance or music. So Bhagaban slowly began building up an all-male dance troupe, focusing on male-oriented dances alone.

A hard taskmaster and a strict disciplinarian, Sahu's energies revolved around the Kendra, teaching rustic boys whatever he knew in a systematic, methodical manner. The avid trainees, all from the farming community belonged to the environs of the village and put their heart and soul into imbibing their art. Their guru was their leader, their role model who had taken it upon himself to resuscitate the near-defunct local dances and music forms. While addressing his pupils, Bhagaban reiterated time and again that it was in their hands to save the dying dances, to breathe new life into the folk forms of arts and to keep alive the heritage and traditions of Orissa.

Bhagaban immersed himself wholeheartedly into stabilising and expanding the activities of the Kala Vikash Kendra and revitalizing the various folk dance forms and music items. By now, his family too had expanded. The second son Rajendra and two daughters Sachala and Manasa followed one after the other in quick succession. But Bhagaban, the father of five, continued with his learning and teaching sprees. His research on different folk dances took him to different places and gurus. He brought dedicated artists and gurus to hone the skills of the troupe being

trained at the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra. The manifold activities undertaken by the Kendra to revive age-old indigenous dance forms also helped in projecting community life in the village. In fact, one of the earliest visitors to the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra on May 10, 1955 was the Minister of Community Development from Andhra Pradesh, A few months later the Director Community Project, Orissa followed suit. Whosoever visited the Kendra was highly impressed with the dances, both folk and classical, presented to them. In October 1956, officials of the American Embassy in India visited the Centre. Needless to say, they were bowled over by the high and lofty standards of the dancers and musicians.

However, the visit of Shri Lingaraj Panigrahy, Minister of Education, Law and Home, Orissa on 20th August, 1957 proved to be a turning point for Bhagaban Sahu and the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra. The Minister witnessed both classical dance as well as the 'Paika' dance and selected Paika dance for the Republic Day Celebration in Delhi the following month.

For the warrior or 'Paika' dance, Bhagaban Sahu knew he had to practice hard to play the 'dhol', an indispensable musical instrument to create the tempo and feverish pitch so essential to uplift the martial spirit of the valiant sword-fighters.

Eager to excel in his abiding pursuit, Bhagaban wasn't one to compromise on a guru. Only the best would serve the purpose. So the services of Bauria Nayak, the best known drummer of the time were sought. Nayak, belonging to the so called lowly Dandasi community came from the princely estate of Dharakote in Ganjam District to train Bhagaban Sahu. Drum beating was an accomplished art in which men from the Dandasi community excelled. They used to perform at marriage ceremonies, festivals and other celebrations. Bauria Nayak was housed in Bhagaban's

farm-house at Narendrapur. The modest disciple carried the ‘guru dakshina’ of coconuts, bananas, betel leaves and arecanuts and offered them to the guru right on the main road of the village; next he prostrated in reverence, seeking his blessing. The moment the family members got the wind of this, all hell broke loose and Bhagaban became the butt of ridicule.

In the class-conscious society of the late fifties it was sacrilegious for a Brahmin to prostrate before a man belonging to a community that reared pigs. Besides, Nayak was twenty years younger to him. Bhagaban’s family including his otherwise submissive wife violently opposed this act.

The odds firmly stacked against him, Bhagaban stuck to his guns. “Whatever be his caste, he is a paragon of perfection in his art. It is God’s supreme will that I learn from the best, player of the ‘dhol’.”

The act alienated all his kith and kin and the entire Brahmin community were up in arms against Bhagaban. But the perpetual seeker for truth was not one to buckle under pressure. He put up with all the humiliation boldly and concentrated on learning the strenuous art.

Whenever Guru Pankaj Charan Das spent two-three weeks teaching at the Kala Kendra, Bhagaban Sahu would prostrate before him and offer rice, pulses, coconuts and cash as the customary ‘Guru dakshina’. For Bhagaban, the ‘guru’ was a medium, an intermediary to reach the omnipotent, almighty God.

In the neighbourhood, another long-standing friendship began to germinate. The new headmaster of Narendrapur High School, Sahadeba Panigrahy became the friend, philosopher and guide of Bhagaban Sahu right from the time he came to Narendrapur in 1957.

BLOSSOMING OF A GENIUS

Being adjudged the winner of the President's medal in 1958 was indeed a feather in the cap of Bhagaban Sahu. The entire village danced with jubilation. They made no bones of the fact that one of their brethren had brought glory to their tiny village and rekindled their love for the ancient dance. Some of the so-called detractors who'd heaped scorn on Bhagaban realised it was futile to be at loggerheads with the maverick or his passion for music and dance.

To the secretary cum founder of Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra it was like crossing the Rubicon. He now focussed completely on learning and practising eclectic folk dances and folk instrumental music in his institution. Only those who had a genuine love for dance could join voluntarily and learn the selected pieces right from the conceptualisation stage. Under the able guidance of Bhagaban, their spontaneous skills and dexterous movements, vigorous footwork and above all excellent team-work soon metamorphosed them into superb dancers who could be included in the repertoire of various folk dances. The troupe started giving programmes in other towns and villages of the State. The year 1958 catapulted Bhagaban Sahu to fame and glory. It also gave him his youngest child, Kishor Kumar Sahu who was to share a special bonding with his talented father for many cherished years and continue his father's legacy.

Dignatories not only from within the country but also from

foreign countries like the U.S.A., Thailand, Russia started pouring in to witness the activities at the Centre and returned with eulogies, extolling the wide variety of folk art and culture forms at the Kala Vikash Kéndra. The visitors' record book contains laudatory messages from the personalities who have had a wonderful experience at the Kendra.

Later that at a festive occasion at Cuttack's Kaliaboda Ashram, Bhagaban Sahu presented a captivating dance to regale the audiences. Sitting spellbound amidst the devotees assembled there, was Pagal Baba, the guru of the ashram. So enthralled was he that he removed the garland of flowers from his neck and placed it around Bhagaban's. "Avadhoot Pagala is immensely pleased with you", declared Pagaldev, "Pagla prophesies that your dance and music will bestow untold fame on you, both within and outside the country."

Bhagaban's quest for a guru probably led him to Pagla Baba. He fell at the Baba's feet and from that moment on, became his ardent disciple. Surendranath Das who was instrumental in setting up the Kala Vikash Kendra introduced Bhagaban Sahu to the nonconformist preacher. The Baba used to wear a long robe and nothing else. One of the tenets of the Baba was that the disciples could not wear trousers or pants. So unflinching was Bhagaban's faith that he stopped wearing trousers from then on. A shirt or kurta became his upper garment and a dhoti formed his lower garment. On the insistence of his devotee, Pagla Baba visited Narendrapur and spent a few days, giving discourses. Bhagaban, his staunch disciple got an ashram built for Pagla Baba which still exists in the village.

Bhagaban's day used to begin early in the morning with prayers to innumerable gods. He would walk upto the Kala Vikash Kendra after picking up the boys on the way for practice. By

9a.m. he would stroll back home for his breakfast and then rush back to the Kendra. A short visit to the Baghunath temple was a must in between. A short gap for lunch at home and again from 6p.m. to 8 p.m. it would be rigorous practice sessions at the Kendra. Before calling it a day, he would inevitably play different musical instruments at the temple. His routine, strictly adhered to when he was in the village, continued for years. But one thing through out his life that did not need the clock to remind him was his invocation to God in his various manifestations. Innumerable times during the entire day Bhagaban would join his palms in prayer or touch the floor with his forehead as a mark of reverence to the Lord Supreme.

As regards wearing a wrist watch, Bhagaban could never bring himself to do it. Yet, he was always punctual to the minute and never ever missed a scheduled bus, train or plane in his life. Carrying his dance troupe to various venues for concerts, Bhagaban's Kala Vikash Kendra began to make waves in the cultural circles of the country. Some of the students who accompanied him to various concerts included Narasu Parida, Sarathi, Biswanath Sahu, Bhagawan Sahu, Natabar Maharana, Sahadev Behera, Krishnama Reddy, Bhagaban Patra, Padmacharana Gouda, Trinath Reddy, Laxman Nahak, Narayan Panigrahy, Balaram Behera, Narahari Sahu, Bharat Gouda. Bhagaban's sons Rabindranath, Rajendra and Kishor too learnt the folk dances and accompanied their father on his tours.

Basically for folk dancers, dance is a spontaneous expression of joy. Since they dance more for themselves than for the spectators, it is believed that at times they tend to become monotonous and repetitive. In order to avoid repetition for long periods, Bhagaban Sahu experimented and improvised many folk dances keeping the basic rural style intact. His main purpose

was to appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of the viewers, both rural and urban. The selected dances had to be suitable for presentation on stage as well as in the open air street festivals. At every step, right from selecting the spectacular colour combination of costumes to training small boys for the background folk songs, Bhagaban Sahu was involved. He had an eye for detail as much as for splendour and magnificence.

One of the most appreciated dances from Bhagaban's repertory was Chadheiya, In January 1960, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra bagged the first prize during the Republic Day celebrations at Cuttack, As mentioned earlier, the Chadheiya dance is a votive dedication to Lord Shiva and is a celebrated item of the Danda Nata, a religious festival of Orissa's Ganjam district, celebrated in the month of Chaitra (March-April). Taking the solo dance item from the actual Danda Nrutya which has tribal origins, Bhagaban transformed it into a vigorous group number with resonating beats of *dhol*, clarinet, conch shells and cymbals all together, blending harmoniously, with Bhagaban Sahu often playing on the *dhol*. The dancers in their colourful costumes and peacock feathers along with the drummer would build up a fine tempo with synchronising steps and whirl high up in unison in two styles of whirling called 'Akash Bhaunri' and 'Shunya Bhaunri'. A lot akin to the Mayurbhanj Chhau style of leg extensions, the Chadheiya dance stands out for the vigorous leaps and vibrant twirling.

Bhagaban's first honour back in 1958, set the ball rolling for him. At the Folk Dance Festival at New Delhi in 1961, Bhagaban Sahu received the Runners-up Cup from the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru. It was indeed a proud moment for Bhagaban Sahu and his entire troupe to be felicitated by such a magnetic personality, of whom they'd been hearing paeans of

praise for years. Panditji was highly impressed by Bhagaban's drum-beating style in the concluding moments when the troupe leader whirled up continuously, going round and round beating the 'dhol' intermittently. But, for the unassuming Bhagaban, garnering accolades meant greater challenges to enhance performance standards.

He now concentrated on practising and perfecting the extremely dextrous and complicated stilt dance called Ranapa. Basically a folk dance of the cowherd communities of southern Orissa's Ganjam district, Ranapa stands for stilts. Two bamboo sticks (almost 6ft long) with a footrest about two feet from below are used by the dancers. Strapping their feet to the tiny strips of bamboo, holding the pair of sticks, the dancers move forward, backward, swirling, jumping, aligning themselves into two rows facing each other, moving rhythmically all the time to the high pitch of 'changu' and 'mahuri' music as a befitting backdrop. At times small boys, in conventional and colourful dresses, sing melodious songs based on Lord Krishna's boyhood pranks. Attired in attractive red and yellow dhotis, kurtas and turbans with peacock plumes, the dancers present a spectacular sense of symmetry and balance in their acrobatic steps. Some people opine that the practice of dancing on stilts was elevated to an art during the British period when prisoners tried to clandestinely escape from the high-walled boundaries of the jails with the help of stilts.

The Ranapa dance is believed to have originated in Ganjam district itself. Some art lovers aver that the word 'Ranapa' literally means battle (Rana) on 'pa' meaning feet. The peasants who joined the battle invented this technique of walking with stilts to step up their speed in reaching the battlefield. The stilts enabled them to hasten their pace by taking large strides and saving time. Bhagaban Sahu's team is credited with perfecting and popularising

this traditional, indigenous dance not only within the country but also in farflung places overseas.

Basically performed on a big, plain ground, Ranapa began to be shown on stages and auditoriums too. Bhagaban Sahu, in his research article on Ranapa made it clear that though several improvisations and alterations had been initiated into the folk dance, due care had been taken to retain the basic, ancient traditions of the Ranapa dance. To quote from excerpts of Bhagaban Sahu's article, one can get an idea of his research:- 'Vocal music is not as prevalent as it should have been. The troupe also adopted vocal music besides other instrumental music to be sung by the dancers themselves..... In the course of the dance, the 'bhangis' (actions) would be of the type of Lord Krishna . Of the various types of this dance, the Krishna type, peacock type, Chadheiya type and Kanda-nrutya type are famous. The monkey-type of this dance is also introduced to arouse humour and interest among the spectators. The round type, whirl type and dancing in steep area strictly adhering to the 'Pala' and rhythm of the music which is the most difficult type are being practised and success is inevitable."

The Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra soon began to establish an identity of its own. Bhagaban Sahu's enthusiasm and tenacity brought out nothing but the best in the troupe's performances. People from far and near made it a point to visit the temple of performing folk arts and witness some of the folk dances from Bhagaban's repertoire. Their exhilaration and appreciation as recorded in the visitors' book is a pointer to their ecstatic experience. Besides Collectors, bureaucrats from Delhi and Bhubaneswar, the Consul General of the USSR in Kolkata, UNICEF Representatives, Youth Exchange Programme members, Group Study Exchange team members from Rotary

Clubs visited the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra at different times and were entertained by Bhagaban Sahu's talented group.

Bhagaban Sahu's tours to other places increased in leaps and bounds. In the biting cold of November-December 1964, the troupe was sent to border areas of Jammu, Pathankot, Udhampur to entertain the defence troops. Close on the heels of this trip, a highly successful tour to Mumbai followed.

In between these hectic schedules Bhagaban took an unexpected trip to Kalahandi in South-Western Orissa to pick up the nuances of the famous 'Ghoomura' folk dance. The 'Ghoomura' or 'Ghumra' is a vigorous dance with an earthen drum called Ghoomura. The dancer ties the 'Ghoomura' or drum to his waist and plays on it with both hands. The mouth of the ghoomura is covered with snake skin and stems out cylindrically. The dancers move in a slow concentric circle and then stand erect in a line, beating the drums all along and dancing simultaneously in their attractive blue and orange dhotis and kurtas and turbans with peacock plumes. Two small boys dressed in ceremonial attire sing folk songs as the troupe dances with sounds of the 'ghoomura' and jingling anklets on their feet. The predominant notes of the 'mahuri' and strains of the 'nisan' are effectively utilised to spur on the dancers. Although this all-male dance is performed in Kalahandi, Bolangir and Sambalpur (with slight variations), in Ganjam, Bhagaban Sahu adopted it for performing on stage by adding his own improvisations and working diligently to make the jumps, pirouettes and intricate steps of the dance look spectacular. The crisscrossing steps, excellent synchronisation of movements and incredible foot-work in unison with the splendid visual effect, holds the spectators spellbound.

Along with the Paika, Chadheiya, Ghoomura and Ranapa

dance, Bhagaban Sahu included the Laudi dance and Dasabhuja dance also in his repertoire at the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra.

‘Laudi’ is a traditional dance of the children of Oriya Paikas or warriors. The warriors would train their children in the art of warfare with the help of sticks. Each performer holds two bamboo sticks and strikes the other’s with clockwork precision. As the music of drums, cymbals and clarinets reaches a crescendo, the steps become more vigorous and rhythmic. This dance is performed on festive occasions like Rakhi Poornima and ‘Pausa’ Poornima. The red-flowing dhoti with attractive borders, red waistband tied across yellow frock-like frilly tops, red turbans with prominent borders forms the raiment that enhances the beauty of this simple yet impressive dance.

The Dasabhuja dance, as the name implies is the ferocious dance performed by goddess Durga after slaying the demon Mahishasur. Performed throughout Orissa by men, the ten-armed goddess dances to the beats of ‘dhol’, ‘changu’ and ‘mahuri’, holding a trident and other weapons in her arms.

If folk dances enamoured Bhagaban, could folk music be far behind ? After all human beings respond to the melody present in the natural environment. Since sound is all-pervasive in the world, it is but natural that it affects the listeners in a soothing manner. The ever restless Bhagaban, though 50 years now, began to gain mastery over various musical instruments and create his own fusion music. A strange forest music called Dhumpa music using a medley of instruments like bamboo, clarinet, drums, jhanj, nisan and ghoomura was the outcome of some such experiments.

Besides the Sankha Dhvani of the conch shells, Pancha Badya, Veer Badya, the Mrudanga Badya were some of the folk

music styles that Bhagaban learnt and taught his diligent students.

As a tutor, he was uncompromising. Nothing but the best was his aim. So, he was a strict, hard-task master who expected his students to perform to their fullest potential.

WIDENING OF HORIZONS

Led by the able Bhagaban Sahu, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra began to carve a niche for itself. The troupe's performances at Universities, Colleges, Inter-State Cultural functions and other fora increased incredibly. In 1968, at the Republic Day Celebrations at Delhi, they performed before the then Yugoslavia President Marshal Tito and followed it with a programme in honour of the UNCTAD delegates in the capital. Bhagaban Sahu began to get recognised at major folk festivals. The accolades and appreciation gave him a new high. His monumental creation of love, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra got recognition from the Government of India as the International Dance Training Centre in 1974 twenty years after it was established. To top it all, came the announcement of the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1974, The presentation ceremony took place at Delhi's Rabindra Bhawan on March 7, 1975. Bhagaban Sahu was the first recipient of this award in the Folk category introduced by the Sangeet Natak Akademi for the first time. When Bhagaban Sahu received the prestigious award from the President of India, Dr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, at the age of 60, he was overwhelmed with joy.

Even before the State Sangeet Natak Akademi recognised his merit, the Centre had bestowed this honour on him and the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra. 'For his eminence in the field of dance and his contribution to its enrichment, Shri Bhagaban

Sahu receives the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Folk Dance' read the citation of the Akademi at the award presentation ceremony. This was the first major national recognition after almost 20 long years of the establishment of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra. This, no doubt, was special when compared to the awards received during the Republic Day and Independence Day functions.

But more than the award what interested him was his desire to present his troupe's performance on stage. No sooner was the date for his being conferred the award announced than Bhagaban Sahu dashed off a letter to Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan in Delhi, expressing his ardent desire to perform in Delhi. But even before receiving a confirmation to that effect, Bhagaban exhorted his boys, "Pack up for the Delhi tour, God willing, we'll present the major dances", he announced. Officially, he could take only one escort with him and that was his younger brother. But he wanted most of his Kendra artistes to be involved in that glorious moment. What better way than showcasing their talent on such a proud occasion ? So Bhagaban paid all the initial travel and boarding expenses to ensure the artistes would get an opportunity to perform.

In Delhi, although their programme was not included in the original schedule, Bhagaban Sahu sent word to the authorities expressing his ardent desire to display his troupe's dancing skills. Thanks to a last-minute effort by the organisers, an impromptu programme was added and the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra got its much-awaited chance to perform before an august gathering of the Sangeet Natak Akademi awardees, officials and artists. The troupe's artistes were rewarded and their leader adjusted the prize money of five thousand rupees on their food and

boarding expenses. More than anything, Bhagaban Sahu's passion for dance endeared him to all and sundry.

Spurred on by the newly-acquired confidence, Bhagaban Sahu's troupe forged ahead on its maiden foreign trip in August 1975. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi, sponsored Bhagaban Sahu's troupe to Thimpu and Phuntsholing in Bhutan to participate in the Indian Independence Day celebration there. The King of Bhutan, the Queen mother and other royal family members witnessed the programme with other high officials of the Kingdom and were immensely delighted with the exquisite folk dance performances of the Kala Vikash Kendra.

For Bhagaban and his troupe this tour was a novel experience. Flying from Bagdogra airport for the first time in an aircraft thrilled the young artistes to no end. But for Bhagaban, neither food nor flight mattered. The programme had to be 'perfect'. The troupe kept performing at different venues to raving reviews.

A show at the All India Science Congress at Bhubaneswar; a variety presentation in Kolkata under the aegis of the Kolkata Youth Choir, an enthralling programme at Gopalpur where a French television team recorded the colourful spectacle were some of the performances during 1977. For the Dussehra Festival in the Kulu Valley, Himachal Pradesh on October 21 and 22, 1977, the artistes reached there before the scheduled time. On the eve of the programme, Bhagaban's penchant for worshipping God at a temple carried him 5 kms on foot in the biting cold Kulu weather. But the lengthy stretch he covered with new footwear took its toll. Bhagaban's feet were sore with blisters. Everybody grew anxious. But much to their relief, Bhagaban stunned all with his scintillating performance.

Bhagaban Sahu was selected for the 1977-1978 State Sangeet Natak Akademi award by the Cultural Department of Orissa. The citation presented at Bhubaneswar in 1979 stated : 'As a unique folk dance exponent, you have gained immense popularity throughout the country. Your incessant efforts in bringing Orissa's traditional folk dances of Chadheiya, Ranapa, Ghoomura and Paika into international limelight speaks volumes for your exemplary talent and artistic merit.' The Chief Minister also handed over a cash prize of two thousand rupees to Bhagaban Sahu.

A whirlwind tour to Syria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen from 17 September to 5 October was sponsored by the ICCR. Ghoomura, Paika, Chadheiya and Ranapa were the selected highlights to showcase the varied folk dances at Damascus and Aleppo in Syria, Abu Dhabi and other cities in UAE and Saudi Arabia. That the audiences were regaled beyond measure was evident from their abundant compliments. For Bhagaban, the entire tour was a liberating experience. It enabled him to establish a strong foothold on the folk art scene not just in the country but also abroad. This tour also brought him in contact with another great personality- Pandit Birju Maharaj, the eminent Kathak maestro.

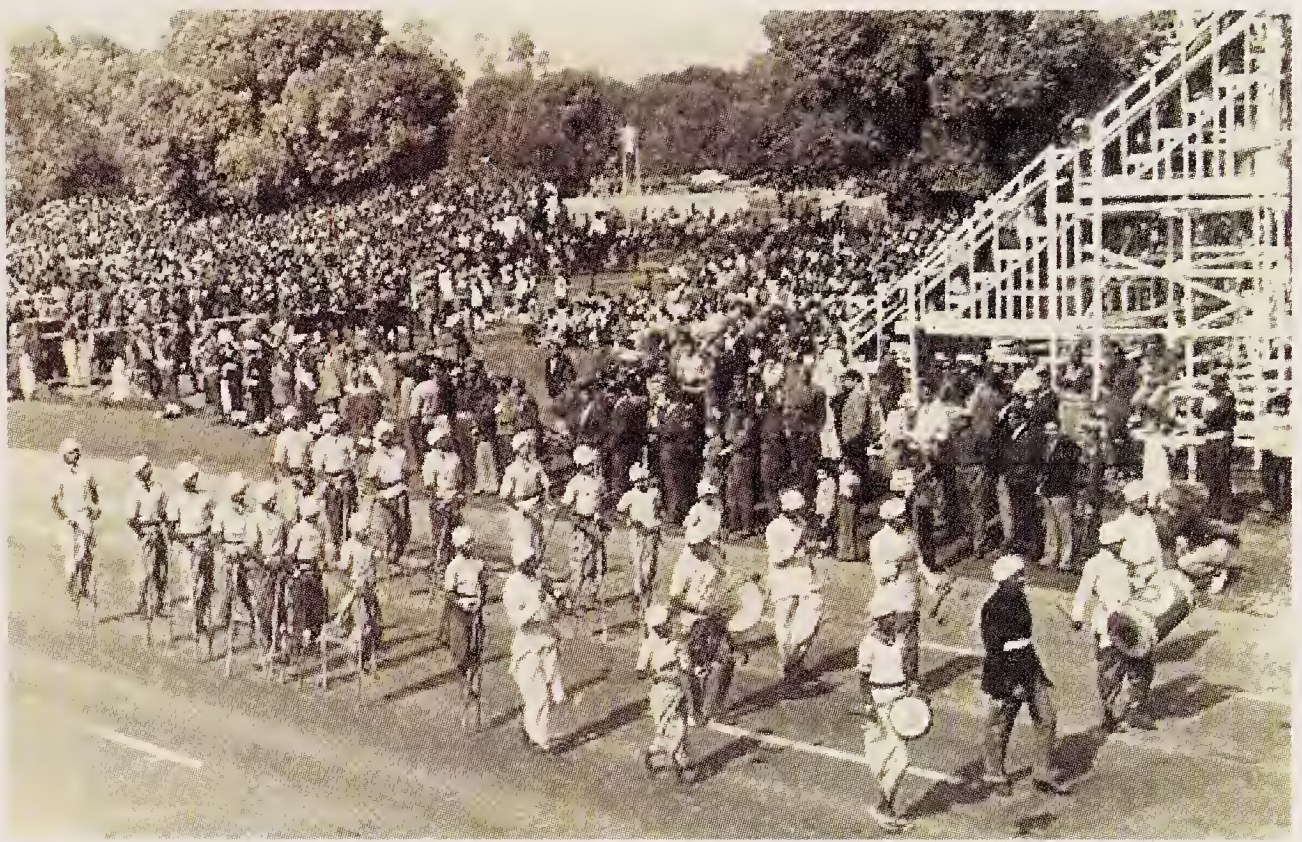
The Silver Jubilee celebrations of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra on 7 and 8 February 1980 was a grand gala event when Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, Joint Education Advisor was the Chief Guest. A souvenir was brought out to commemorate the event. Twenty five successful years of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra also meant two and a half decades added to the two score years of the founder-father. For Bhagaban was but forty years when he had envisioned setting up a training centre to revive and to invigorate the near-defunct folk dances of the region. With the passage of time, the obsession and verve of the

‘sixty-six years young’ choreographer seemed to grow endlessly.

At the behest of the North Central Zonal Cultural Centre, Bhagaban Sahu visited Dehradun, Mussoorie, Nainital and Rampur in July 1980 to participate in the Parvatiya Parva and exhibit a variety of dances from his repertoire.

The school dropout who later on laid great emphasis on his children’s education got an opportunity to take up study in earnest at the advanced age of 65 years. With a view to rejuvenate the traditional folk arts in the country, the Department of Culture, Government of India awarded Bhagaban Sahu a 2-year Fellowship in 1980, to study and learn some of the important folk dances of Southern Orissa. In his report Bhagaban Sahu wrote : “During the first year, I took up the study and training of the Bagha Nacha (Tiger Dance) which is most popular in the area. During this period, I travelled to different areas of the district of Ganjam where the dance is most popular. In different villages of Bhanjanagar, Polasora, Digapahandi, Kodala, Aska, Berhampur area, I met the most versatile artistes of this dance and the traditional percussionists who provide accompaniment to the dance.”

The report also contains the various types of dance movements along with the rhythmic variations of the ‘tala’ played as accompaniments to the Tiger dance. Besides, other techniques like the sitting postures, movement of the shoulders, jerky jumps, stealthy looks and the pouncing stance of the tiger are enumerated in detail. To gain mastery over the Bagha Nacha takes years and years of rigorous practice. Though Bhagaban Sahu spent several years to learn the tiger dance, his extensive research on the theme during his fellowship enabled him to achieve the requisite sense of rhythm, subtlety and stamina. His research report about the dance is as interesting as it is noteworthy :



Dancers of Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra performing Ranapa or stilt dance at the Republic Day parade in 1968



Bhagaban Sahu in 1968 with Smt. Indira Gandhi after the Republic Day performance in 1968



Chadheiya dance performance with Bhagaban Sahu playing on drum



Paika Dance performance of the Narendrapur
Kala Vikash Kendra



Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra dancers performing Dasabhuja dance



Tiger dance being performed by the dancers of Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra



Bhagaban Sahu marching with his troupe members (2nd in right row) in a street procession in France, 1985



Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra troupe performing 'Ranapa' dance in Wellington, New Zealand in 1999

‘Imitative dances of the animals are mostly prevalent among the tribes of the world. The Bagha Nacha or the Tiger Dance is such an imitative dance which was once prevalent among the tribes of Orissa. Its origin is traced to the imitative dances of the Bhuiyan tribes who live in large numbers in the adjoining district of Koraput. Chaitra Parva is a big festival of the tribal community of Koraput. During this festival, they perform varieties of colourful dances. The Bhuiyans, alongwith their favourite Changu dance also indulge in the performance of a number of imitative dances such as Bagha Pari Nat (Tiger Dance), Bhalu Pari Nat (Bear Dance), Miriga Pari Nat (Deer Dance) etc. It is not known when but it is certain that this Tiger Dance, now performed as a folk dance in the district of Ganjam has been adopted from the tribal dance of the Bhuiyans by the low-caste Hindu as a form of entertainment during their fairs and festivals’.

Performed during the Thakurani Jatra festival of the presiding local deity of Berhampur in Orissa, many young men dressed as tigers in their painted yellow and black-striped bodies dance in front of the deity and in processions. It involves a lot of labour and stringent practice.

Having spent 25 years to perfect the art and make it suitable for presentation on the stage, Bhagaban Sahu strove relentlessly to popularize this traditional folk dance within the country and abroad. Training in the tiger dance is still imparted at the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra. In fact, Bhagaban Sahu played a crucial part in the production of the Hindi film ‘Bagh Bahadur’ directed by Buddhadeb Dasgupta. Pawan Malhotra who donned the greasepaint to face the arc lights as a tiger dancer Ghunuram in the film, depicted the travails of a rural folk artist who is unable to make both ends meet due to changing tastes of the audiences. The tiger dancer ends up working as a labourer in the city while

Samba, an animal trainer settles in the village, attracting the people to his various tricks. The film 'Bagh Bahadur' won the Golden Lotus for Best Feature Film in the 37th National Film Festival of India in 1990. In fact, Bhagaban Sahu's earlier stint with films was in 1966 when Mrinal Sen directed 'Matira Manisha' in Oriya. Bhagaban Sahu appeared in two folk dance items presented in the film. His association with the producer of the film, Babulal Doshi, the driving force behind the Kala Vikash Kendra of Cuttack was as rewarding as it was enduring.

Despite travelling to various places and picking up the arduous steps of the Tiger Dance, Bhagaban Sahu remained somewhat disillusioned. Ever in the pursuit of excellence, he was on the lookout for a perfectionist in the art, one who could dance and play the 'changu', He heard that Mitika Nayak, a young boy hailing from Berhampur had been married to a girl belonging to Narendrapur, The boy had gained mastery over the technique of the Tiger Dance and was an exceptionally skilful 'changu' player. That he belonged to the low 'Hadi' community (specialising in playing the percussion instrument) didn't certainly go against him. At least in the eyes of Bhagaban, no person's caste could overshadow his innate talent.

Watching Mitika Nayak perform the Bagha Nacha and playing the 'changu' with spontaneous ease, Bhagaban was convinced that anybody who could teach him to beat the small drum with thin sticks was no one but this man. Many eyebrows were raised when Bhagaban Sahu, in his late sixties prostrated in front of Mitika, a Harijan, fit to be his grandson in age.

Years ago, when Bhagaban learnt to play the 'dhol' from Bauriya Nayak, an outcaste, his act was denounced as a contravention of social norms. But by now, everyone was familiar with the maverick master's single-minded devotion and quest for

excellence that nobody dared question him. Bhagaban imbibed the style of beating the 'changu' and selected his namesake Bhagawan, fondly called 'Bhagiya' by him to perform the dance in his repertoire at programmes. While Bhagawan Patro danced in a head mask with steps akin to a tiger's, Bhagaban Sahu played on the 'changu' dexterously as the requisite accompaniment.

During the second year of his fellowship, Bhagaban strove to learn and master Veera Vadya, a unique type of percussion music where the drummers also dance in a group rhythmically. As the name symbolises, the dance is meant for soldiers. In the days of yore, it was customary for musicians and drummers to accompany the peasant militia or Paikas on their war expeditions. The reverberating sounds played with two lean sticks incited and exhorted the warriors. In this performance, the 'changu' and 'mahuri' are played by the drummers and pipers in unison with various dance patterns. Travelling to different places and learning from the musicians and dancers mainly belonging to the so called low communities, Bhagaban finally zeroed-in on Dayanidhi Mishal, a versatile performer and learnt the various dance movements and rhythmic patterns of their corresponding 'talas' from his guru.

As part of his fellowship research, Bhagaban also perfected the subtle nuances of the Binakara dance, a ritual dance from the repertoire of the Danda Nata of Southern Orissa. The Binakara is a solo dancer who sings hymns in praise of Lord Shiva while holding a bow fitted with jingling bells and decorated with peacock plumes.

Although Bhagwan's period of fellowship formally ended on 1st July 1982, the drummer, dancer, choreographer and guru par excellence remained a researcher at heart till the very end.

FROM THE WELL OF DEATH TO THE LONDON COLISEUM

The year 1982 heralded a new era with favourable tidings sweeping the cultural scenario in India particularly in dance, music and drama. It was during this year that the Governments of India and Great Britain embarked on a gigantic cultural programme of dance, music and drama exhibitions at various locations all over the British Isles. Entitled the Festival of India-Great Britain, 1982, the venture proved to be a turning point in the lives of many classical and folk dancers and musicians. The wide, international exposure that these Indian artistes, especially those hailing from remote areas and villages received was a dream come true for many,

Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India and her British counterpart Margaret Thatcher were the joint patrons of the Festival of India while Pupul Jayakar was the chairperson of the Indian Advisory Committee that included other elite members like Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, B. V. Karanth, Usha Bhagat, Girish Karnad.

The Festival Finale was held at the London Coliseum on Sunday, the 14th November 1982 in the presence of His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, M.P.

As Joint Patron, Indira Gandhi evinced deep interest in personally selecting some of the items in the programme which was introduced by popular film actor and producer Shashi Kapoor. Folk dances from Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa were performed along with Kathak dances and Rajastani folk Songs and a Tala-Vadya Kacheri or Percussion ensemble.

The Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra dancers in their richly embellished costumes presented Ranapa, Ghoomura and Chadheiya dances which won accolades for the Bhagaban Sahu and the entire troupe. Little did Bhagaban imagine that he would reach such glorious heights. In fact, his giant leap from the 'Well of Death' to the London Coliseum was nothing short of a miracle. He recalled Pagla Baba's prophecy and thanked him in his heart. An extract from a review in The Daily Telegraph, London, dated 16 November 1982 by Fernau Hall reads :

'The final programme of the Festival of India, performed on Sunday at the Coliseum, was very properly, mainly devoted to dance for, in India, dance is considered the mother of all arts. It was in the last few items that the programme achieved magic with a splendid combination of classical and folk pieces.... In the Chadheiya folk dance from Orissa, the dancers performed in a mysterious ritualistic atmosphere, each carrying a large, symbolic object, while the music was no less fascinating, with musicians playing on a large drum, a piercing oboe-like instrument and two conch shells played simultaneously by one musician. The leaps in this dance were particularly striking.'

The Festival of India, though an expensive year-long proposition, highlighted some of the choicest Indian performing arts. It provided a wonderful platform for our country's foremost exponents to showcase their dexterity in dance and music, both classical and folk. Wherever they performed, they regaled

crowds who were unstinting in their appreciation. Two days after the Festival Finale, the Indian Dance and Music Ensemble floored audiences at Bristol on 16th November, 1982.

The Ranapa or stilt dancers comprising Kishor Sahu, Subhash Panigrahy, Bhagaban Patra, Bauri Behera, Bhaskar Goudo, Sarat Mahapatro, Krishnama Reddy and Padma Goudo also performed the Ghoomura and Chadheiya dances while Rajendra Sahu played the 'dhol' and Rajendra Raulo provided the 'Mahuri' accompaniment.

Bhagaban Sahu, who was the lead drummer for Ghoomura headed the Chadheiya dance team as the lead dancer and drummer. Sarat Mahapatro blew the Shankh or Conch Shell while Rajendra Sahu played on the Jhanja along with the 'Dhol' and 'Mahuri' music, essential for the performance of Chadheiya.

The grace and poise of the performers in their exquisitely resplendent trappings brought the house down and endeared them to all the spectators. As leader and choreographer of the troupe, Bhagaban Sahu hogged the entire limelight and exuded an easy familiarity with his audience. His serene countenance reflected his sense of contentment. Never in his wildest dreams, as a young boy from a remote Indian village did he imagine he would dance away into the hearts of millions of admirers in distant shores. By now, the father of three sons and three daughters, was also a grandfather who revelled in leading by example. Mingling with enthusiastic crowds or shaking hands with royalty or Heads of State had almost become *de rigueur* for this devout dancer and drummer.

Wherever he travelled, he made it a point to carry an Oriya calendar with him. On all auspicious days, he would observe a fast or have a meagre helping of milk, fruits or nuts. Even otherwise,

he was abstemious in his dietary habits, relying more on milk and fruits on his foreign sojourns. Once, while on a tour to the middle-east when he was offered camel's milk after the late night show, he refused to touch a drop and instead preferred to go to bed on an empty stomach. All through his life, he steered clear of tea, coffee, betel leaf, cigarettes and other vices. Dance was, perhaps, the only enduring addiction in his life.

Prior to leaving for London to participate in the Festival of India, hectic preparations had to be made. Since it would be unbearably cold in November, Dhiren Patnaik, Secretary of the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi insisted on all the dancers getting a pair of trousers, coats and shoes ready for themselves before departure. The five-star hotel that they would be accommodated in followed a strict dress code where it was mandatory for the occupants to wear suits and shoes, he proclaimed. To Bhagaban Sahu, this bit of news came like a bolt from the blue. Ever since he'd become a disciple of Pagla Baba he had quit wearing trousers.

The Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra troupe landed at Heathrow airport on 12 November, 1982. As anticipated, the party trembled in the bone-chilling temperatures of 4° celsius. They were asked to wear their winter garments and shoes. Bhagaban, however, stood his ground. No amount of cajoling could waive his resolve. On the way to the hotel, he confided in his son, "If in the hotel, they insist on implementing their so-called dress code, I'll opt out on my own volition. I prefer to stay as paying guest elsewhere", he said. Fortunately, the troupe was put up in London's Taj Hotel where much to everybody's relief no such restrictions were enforced.

From London, the troupe proceeded to Spain, its next destination. Sponsored by the ICCR, folk troupes from Chamba,

Kinnaur and Kulu in Himachal Pradesh and folk singers and dancers from Rajasthan along with Orissa's Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra performed at various venues in Spain. Despite language being a barrier, there was a congenial atmosphere as an initial trickle turned into a steady flow and then a flurry of activity captured all the towns and cities. Be it indoor concerts or at street festivals in Valencia, Madrid, Malaga, Melilla, Ceuta or Barcelona, wherever they exhibited their vibrant dances, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra left an indelible impact. Art, in general and folk dance and music in particular has the potential to transcend all cultural barriers.

If the young members of Sahu's troupe were enamoured of the razzle-dazzle of the west, the elderly patriarch and founding father could cull enough food for his soul at each of his concerts in Europe. From the paeans of praise that were showered on him, it was clear that he stood head and shoulders above the rest. People often put questions regarding the origin and significance of the dances. Bhagaban's research work in his formative stages stood him in good stead as he delved into the source of the dances, their significance within the paradigm of the ethnic dance, the variations he had endeavoured to bring about in the original, traditional styles in order to make them suitable for the stage and other such details.

If he didn't sound articulate enough, the officials accompanying him like Dhiren Patnaik and Dhiren Dash of the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi or his younger brother Parsuram Sahu or at times, friend Sahadebo Panigrahy interpreted his words more eloquently to the curious audiences.

Bhagaban's brainchild, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra was everything that he'd envisioned it to be. Having fostered several groups of raw, amateur sons of the soil, hailing from in and around the villages of Narendrapur, bracing and training them,

reassuring and sustaining their endeavours, Bhagaban, in 1982 had ventured into hitherto uncharted territory. Although his 1975 visit to Bhutan had set the ball rolling, the European tour was certainly an entirely new ball game.

For Bhagaban another good reason to revel that year was his close associate and buddy Sahadebo Panigrahy, Headmaster of Narendrapur High School had won the best teacher state award, conferred on him by the Orissa Government in 1982.

Sahadebo Panigrahy and Bhagaban Sahu remained inseparable right from 1957 till Bhagaban's death in 2002. Sahadebo, years younger than Bhagaban, remained a strong pillar of support throughout. In fact, Sahadebo Panigrahy was greatly instrumental in bringing Bhagaban Sahu to the limelight. Working silently, often behind the scenes, Panigrahy handled all the correspondence of the disarmingly frank Bhagaban. The school master wielded a powerful pen and had fluency in both English and Oriya. Panigrahy accompanied the troupe on many occasions including the maiden Bhutan visit, the Middle-East and England. But before including his name in the prospective middle-east tour, Bhagaban laid a precondition. Sahadebo Panigrahy should learn to perfectly play a few folk musical instruments before Govind Vidyarthi, Deputy Secretary of the Kendra Sangeet Natak Akademi would formally inspect their performance in two months' time. Every evening at six Panigrahy would go to the Kendra to learn to play the 'changu', 'jhanja' etc. A slight delay for rehearsals would enrage the guru. Once when Sahadebo was late by a few minutes, Bhagaban chided him, "As a headmaster are you ever punctual to school?" Panigrahy stood bashfully, never to miss a class again. Elaborating on this unique relationship, Sahadebo Panigrahy recounts :

"To him I was always 'master'. He was a soft-spoken

person who rarely opened up to anyone. But he knew I was always there for him. He would confide every small bit of detail in me. Even if the doctor prescribed a tablet or injection for him, he wouldn't purchase it immediately. He would first walk up to me, seek confirmation and clearance and then proceed. The doctors posted here often pulled his leg on this score. 'If he is a school master, I'm a doctor', joked one of them, 'who can treat you better if you are sick, a doctor or a teacher?' But Bhagaban took all this in good humour".

Sahadebo Panigrahy, a repository of several such anecdotes reminisced about the England tour when the Duke of Edinburgh initially expressed his reluctance to be present at a performance by Bhagaban's troupe. Later, he relented to spare a minute for it. However, so enthralled and absorbed was the royal personage that he ended up standing and savoring the spectacle for almost 15 minutes!

Bhagaban Sahu's concord with royalty continued when his troupe was called upon to entertain Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II and other Heads of State, including Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi at New Delhi's Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in November 1983.

Whenever he visited Delhi, Bhagaban Sahu made it a point to stay at the Jagannath Temple at Hauz Khas. A down-to-earth, godfearing man, Bhagaban attributed his success to God and of course, his gurus. Another person he profoundly admired and revered was Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan. An eminent researcher, scholar, critic, writer and connoisseur of Indian art and dance. Dr. Vatsyayan, as Joint Secretary of Culture, Government of India has greatly encouraged and contributed to Bhagaban Sahu's popularity right from the time she first met him at Delhi in 1975. No matter which organisation she headed, she ensured that

genuine talent and potential received unstinted support and wide exposure. In a way, the rural folk arts of India have been brought to centrestage because of the vision, initiative and drive of such stalwarts.

Bhagaban Sahu always acknowledged his indebtedness to Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan and made it a point to call on her, whenever in the capital. The mutual respect they shared for one another is reflected in the high esteem the entire clan of Sahu holds for 'Madam' even after the demise of the legend. Bhagaban Sahu's youngest son Kishor remembers one such visit :

"I must've accompanied my father several times to 'Madam's house. Her visiting time was always between 5.30 a.m. to 6.30 a.m. in the morning. On that particular day, my father and I took an auto near the Jagannath Temple at Hauz Khaz to reach Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan's house. The reckless driver somehow took us on the wrong track. Nonna (father) began to get restless. Though he didn't wear a watch, he was extremely conscious of the time. Realising it would take at least another hour, he got down, paid the auto driver and began walking at an unimaginable, frenetic pace. Somehow, we managed to reach the house by 8 O'clock. Luckily it was a Sunday and Madam was at home. Nonna apologised for being late and later told me that he felt extremely guilty for having made her wait. Despite her hectic schedule, she was courteous enough to wait simply because the previous day my father had fixed up to meet her at 6 O'clock in the morning. Had he not met her there he would have been deeply disappointed."

Bhagaban Sahu shared another long and fulfilling association with Ruma Guha Thakurta of the Kolkata Youth Choir. Having exhibited his immaculate finesse on earlier occasions, could he be excluded from the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of the

Kolkata Youth Choir in 1984 ? So off he went, equipped with additional dances from his repertoire. A visit to Delhi's Pragati Maidan at the behest of the International Trade Fair Authority of India in November 1984 proved to be a nostalgic occasion for Bhagaban. A few days earlier, on 31 October, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her bodyguards. Bhagaban Sahu had met the charismatic leader, on several occasions, performed in front of her, received not just words of encouragement and appreciation but also mementos from her. Her sudden demise left him and his troupe mates completely devastated. But believing the show must go on, he continued with his performances as before.

MESSIAH OF FOLK DANCE

As was his wont, in the last week of November, Bhagaban one day dropped by ‘master’ Panigrahy’s house. A telegram from Madhya Pradesh awaited him. Sahadebo Panigrahy read it out cautiously, ‘The Madhya Pradesh Government has decided to confer its highest honour in folk art ‘The Tulsi Samman’ on Bhagaban Sahu.’ Panigrahy scanned his friend’s expression. Bhagaban reacted to this momentous milestone in his life with a small, contented smile. No ecstasy, no exultation. Nudging him, the master teased him a bit, “I believe the Madhya Pradesh Government intends gifting you one lakh rupees for your dance. One lakh, my friend! can you fathom how much that is ?”

“But why of all, the M.P. Government ?” asked Bhagaban, incredulously, “I’ve hardly performed in that State.”

“Their bigwigs or cultural ambassadors must have witnessed your performances somewhere or heard about your contribution in resuscitating near-extinct folk dances of Orissa. Why else should they honour you ? Or spend a gigantic hundred thousand on you ?” asked Panigrahy playfully as though the money was the icing on the cake.

“I’m least interested in the monetary reward. All I’m particular about is that I should take my boys to M.P. and dazzle everybody with our performances on stage. Let all of them get an opportunity to witness and appreciate a glimpse of our heritage,

our riches, our wealth of pristine folk dances and resonant musical sounds. And then everybody will own up the responsibility of preserving and strengthening the heritage of their regional arts.”

But the ever pragmatic master persisted “You can utilize the money if you save the amount in the name of your favourite baby, the Kendra, It should come in handy for the artistes.”

“Its upto you to decide. But if you could allocate some amount for funding the entire schooling expenses of some deserving children, I’ll be happy.”

That was Bhagaban. Unaffected, Unsullied by materialism. Little did he realise the worth of a lakh of rupees in 1984. If the necessity arose, he insisted on spending from his own resources. That speaks for the dwindling acres of cultivable lands of the family. Ancestral land of nearly 50 acres during the time of Bhagaban’s father was reduced to nearly 12 acres in 2002. The entire family subsists on the paddy from these agricultural land and remains closely-knit despite the upheavals in socio-economic conditions. That they are the kith and kin of a great man-one who never sought fame or fortune but was nevertheless, rewarded in full measure-suffices for them and keeps their strings attached.

Instituted by the Madhya Pradesh Government in 1983, the Tulsi Samman is awarded to distinguished artists or organisations of performing arts including those in the traditional, tribal and folk dance category. Eponymously named after the renowned Indian saint-poet Tulsidas, this prestigious award is perhaps one of the highest decorations in the field of performing arts. The artist is chosen by a select panel of experts after taking certain criteria into account, like assessing the exemplary creative sensibilities, qualitative excellence, the period involved in the active pursuit of that particular art and of course, the sense of dedication of the artist.

That the Tulsi Samman is an endeavour to elevate folk and tribal dances and music and place them on the same pedestal as that of classical dances is a laudatory step, indeed. Bhagaban Sahu, by virtue of his contribution to Orissa's folk dance and music, was unanimously chosen by dignitaries like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Prabhat Ganguly, Narayan Pannikar, Jiban Pani, Dr. Chandrasekhar Kambar and Prof. Shyamacharan Dubey.

The coveted award presentation ceremony took place amidst great fanfare on 13 February 1985 at Bhopal's Bharat Bhavan. However, it was on the following day that Bhagaban Sahu and his troupe got the much-awaited opportunity to perform at the third anniversary celebrations of Bharat Bhavan organised by the M.P. Tribal and Folk Arts Parishad, Bhopal.

The folk dances presented on the 14 February 1985 held a special significance as only the previous day, Bhagaban Sahu had been conferred the Tulsi Samman at a glittering function. Bhagaban and his troupe took the audiences by storm with the synchronising steps and ghoomura music in the Ghoomura dance, the energetic swirling and sense of balance on stilts in the Ranapa dance, the dainty whirls and gyrations of the Chadheiya dance with the divinely sounds of the 'dhol' played by the leader and the soulful music of conch shells with acrobatic feats in the 'Sankhadhwani' number.

The aesthetic appeal and visual impact created by the dancers in full regalia combined with their electrifying performances virtually transported the audiences into another distant yet tranquil world. In one go, Bhagaban went, saw and conquered the hearts of the Bhopal audiences. The press and media were full of rave reviews of his performance and he was hailed as the messiah of folk dance. That too at the age of seventy years and six months !

Bhagaban Sahu's popularity skyrocketed after he won the Tulsi Samman. Under a five-member trust, the prize money was eventually invested under two heads of Rs. 50,000 each. One was to be utilised for needy artistes of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra and the other Rs. 50,000 was to be allocated for economically backward school students or as aid for victims of fires or natural disasters.

The commitments of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra grew in leaps and bounds. Bhagaban and his troupe were always on the move. Travelling entailed a lot of preparation. Not just the costumes, head gear and anklets. The musical instruments which were Bhagaban's treasured objects had to be fine tuned, kept in perfect nick and appear colourful as in the case of the drums that had cases of red, green, yellow, blue and black applique-work designs. Be it the conch shell or the clarinet, the 'nisan' or the 'ghoomura', Bhagaban cherished a profound love and attachment for his musical possessions. It was a unique sense of bonding that defied description.

Both of Bhagaban Sahu's sons-in-law had accompanied him to attend the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award presentation ceremony in Delhi in 1975. On their return, the troupe disembarked at Cuttack station in order to have a darshan of Pagla Baba at his ashram. At the railway station, the luggage was dumped into the hired rickshaws. With a hawk's eye on his instruments, Bhagaban handed over each one of the party a particular musical instrument to carry in their hands carefully. One of the sons-in-law sat in the rickshaw with the drum. While Bhagaban was about to walk alongside, his son-in-law alighted from the rickshaw and began to accompany him, Bhagaban was in a dilemma. How could he tolerate the idea of allowing the rickshaw puller to peddle away with the precious instrument? Neither could he embarrass his son-

in-law by asking him to lift the drum. Beginning to feel very upset at the same moment, he tiptoed to the rickshaw, brought his invaluable percussion instrument out carefully and held it lovingly in his hands, all the while talking to his son-in-law, simply to avoid being caught on the wrong foot.

No matter how he travelled, by van, bus, train or aeroplane, Bhagaban was very particular about the safety of his musical instruments. No one was allowed to sit on the wooden boxes that contained the precious equipments. If for want of space, anyone just stumbled upon a box and sat there, he would very coaxingly evacuate him and instead persuade him to sit on his own lap !

This was just the tip of the iceberg. The foreign jaunts were much more taxing as it wasn't possible to keep watch over the entire luggage. Sure enough, on landing in London to participate in the Festival of India concerts, Bhagaban was shocked to find his 'dhol' missing ! Consternation writ large across his face, he started nagging about it and complaining sadly to the officials. That his musical instrument had got carried over to New York was something he couldn't ever fathom.

"He was extremely perturbed by the incident", laughs son Kishor, "What if the 'dhol' got damaged in transit ? How could he perform to the delight of the foreigners ? These questions stifled him to no end and you can well imagine how he spent that hideous night in an entirely new, alien city. Nevertheless, to the utter relief of one and all and my father in particular, the 'dhol' was retrieved when it was brought to London by the next day's flight from New York, absolutely safe and sound !"

During the eventful year of 1985, France was the chosen venue to display Indian folk dances. Sponsored by the ICCR the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra travelled to 20 cities and towns

in France for two months. At the Festival International de Folklore, Plozevet from July 21 to 18 August 1985, where 22 countries participated, huge posters with Bhagaban Sahu's name were put up as publicity for the shows. The overwhelming response was mind boggling to say the least and the acclaim unparalleled. Sampling the *joie de vivre* of the irrepressible French people during the concerts was indeed a highpoint in the French tour of Bhagaban Sahu's troupe, the language barrier notwithstanding. The 10-day Dance Festival at Confolens showcased some of the best talent in the international folk dance arena and sure enough Bhagaban Sahu's eye-catching folk presentations from Orissa stole a march over the rest !

At one rural area of France, the organisers decided that each one of the performers of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra would stay with individual French families as their guest. It was the duty of the host family to escort the dancer to the venue and after the show, take care of his food and stay. As per plan, on the first day itself, the artistes split and stayed with their respective hosts. The next day when they all met, they narrated their own experiences to each other with their hosts. Each of the twelve had nothing but high praise for the hospitality and concern showered on them by the French families. On no front, either food, bed or cordiality did they have any bone to pick. But the forlorn Bhagaban Sahu kept glum throughout the exuberant chatter of his boys. Although it was crystal clear that something was torturing their guru, no one had the gumption to find out. It finally fell upon Dhiren Dash, the official leader from the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi accompanying them to bell the cat.

Very reluctantly, Bhagaban announced, "I'm not staying in anybody's house, that's final." The reason ? He didn't have to give explanations, he replied brusquely, adding that the entire troupe

had better put up together in a hotel instead. No hotel was available in that French hamlet. The French Organiser was out of his wits as he couldn't find suitable accommodation for the entire troupe. At 71, Bhagaban was proving to be a hard nut to crack. As the last resort, the official asked if he was willing to adjust in tents near a spacious open ground. Anything was better than staying with the locals, declared Bhagaban. Near a basketball court, tents were pitched for the Kala Vikash Kendra performers. All sorts of amenities were provided since it was awfully cold out there. That evening was to be the first show in the area. Bhagaban, feeling a bit uneasy decided to stay back at the last moment. The rest of the group went ahead to perform, assuming they would be back before sunset which occurred rather late, around 7.45 or 8 pm in those parts. The programme over, the enthusiastic French folks almost mobbed the artistes with a deluge of questions. Since understanding them was quite a problem, their stay at the venue got delayed and by the time they returned to the tent it was already half past nine in the night. To their dismay, Bhagaban lying in his sleeping bag was shivering with cold and running temperature. For three days, they were to put up in the tents and their elderly secretary was nothing short of an enigma. A few furtive glances and piercing words from Dhiren Dash succeeded in eliciting the reason for Bhagaban's obstinacy. "The rooms here in a house look so very identical. In the night, instead of entering the toilet, I stepped into the hostess' bedroom. It was awfully embarrassing", he revealed. Inquisitive glances prompted him to continue. "No, the hostess who was very decent didn't mind my faux pas in the least. But I fear if we continue to live in their homes, we may unwittingly make such mistakes again." This evoked a lot of laughter among the younger boys but fearing their mentor's wrath, they suppressed themselves for a while.

Next on the itinerary was a whirlwind tour to an altogether new territory—Morocco in Africa. The performance at Casablanca not only opened new vistas of cultural exchange between the two countries but also paved the way for many more tours to Africa in the future.

At the home front, performances by the Kendra kept soaring, with the troupe travelling to the misty mountains of Sikkim in the North—east to Mysore, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai and other cities in the south. Spurred on by the South Zone Cultural Centre, a memorable visit to the idyllic shores of Andaman and Nicobar islands to participate in the ‘Deep Mahotsav’ stood out as a unique, fulfilling experience.

Bhagaban Sahu felt extremely privileged to be invited to perform at Independence Day celebrations. Excited to present his dances at Pondichery in 1987, he was taken unawares when he went to bathe in the youth hostel bathroom in the morning at six. Bathing over, as he was getting up, the brass tap hit him on the head and he began to bleed profusely. Immediately, he was administered first aid by the boys and the bleeding was kept under control. Injury or no injury it was the auspicious day of Sankranti, so he simply had to rush to a temple. First it was to the Hanuman temple two miles away and then to the Shiva temple. By the time he returned to the hostel, it was 4 pm. A doctor was then summoned and a bandage tied across his head. That very evening at six was the crucial performance. Prabhanjan Parida, a government functionary who accompanied the troupe as well as the other boys dissuaded him from participating. Not one to yield, the septuagenarian very astutely concealed the injury behind his elaborate head gear, a turban.

The ‘dhol’ held in his hands, Bhagaban made a grand entry

onto the stage and played on to a thunderous applause, the drumbeats reverberating in the entire hall. Wearing a tiara to conceal bandage and, oblivious to the throbbing head, the maestro captured the hearts of the assembled spectators.

The show over, Sheelapriya, Director of the South Zone Cultural Centre was distraught at the news. She had always held the 73 year old Bhagaban Sahu in awe and didn't mince words this time. "You ought to have refrained from performing. Suppose the grievous injury aggravates?"

With a twinkle in his eye, belying his age, Bhagaban whispered, "The injury on my head will anyhow heal up in a day or two. But will all those curious spectators out there be able to come again two-three days later simply to watch me perform? I can't imagine dampening their enthusiasm. Their pleasure is mine. So, please" There was no stopping him or his erratic ways.

SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

Bhagaban Sahu's eminence as an unparalleled exponent of folk dance and music began to reach dizzying heights. However, this unprecedented success never went to his head. Ever modest and unassuming, Bhagaban was always willing to help those in distress. Many of his pupils still graciously vouchsafe their indebtedness to him. Recalls Rajendra Prasad Patra who spent 22 years in close contact with Bhagaban Sahu, "Hailing from a very modest family, its unbelievable for me to come this far in life. Guruji who was a father-figure not only taught me dance from the age of eight but also insisted I study in a regular school. He took personal care in arranging for our books and often escorted us to school. Punctuality, another trademark of the man, is a vital lesson we learnt from him. Prior to any tour, he would insist that all the performers assemble at the Kendra the previous night itself. 'We shouldn't keep others waiting for us', 'better to reach a couple of minutes before schedule and wait for others,' he would stress."

As a teacher Bhagaban ensured that the pupils cut no corners. They simply had to give their best shots or else would be severely reprimanded. Prafulla Kumar Behera and others of his ilk who have been under the tutelage of Bhagaban Sahu from as tender an age as nine years feel their lives got a meaningful direction, thanks to 'guruji'. Behera recalls, "Imagine a boy who didn't know a single dance step, learning the intricacies of the rhythm, beats and movements and then performing at festivals and

competitions at national and international venues and earning laurels from reputed personalities. This gives you an idea of the patience, commitment, care and zeal of the teacher who trained him.”

Expressing similar sentiments is Bhagaban Patro who began his training at the Kendra at the age of five. One dance after another, perfecting each one and then gaining mastery over them became his sole objective. Patro was selected to present the solo Tiger Dance or Bagha Nach ever since it got included in Bhagaban’s repertoire of folk dances. Patro fondly remembers: “Guruji used to give me money and send Krishnama Reddy and me to watch performances of Veeravadya, Navadurga and Bagha Nach and search for talented mentors to teach us at the Kendra. But for his dedication, we would never have travelled throughout the length and breadth of the country. For us small time village boys of Badakusasthali it is difficult to even dream of foreign lands, yet, almost seven times we toured abroad and covered about 40 countries of the world.”

Bhagaban Patro’s long standing friend and co-artiste G. Krishnama Reddy had left school after the first standard. Bhagaban Sahu spotted him singing a *sankirtan* and asked him to join his dance lessons if he was interested. “At the age of 10 years, I was given two Ranapa sticks and asked to practice”, recalls Reddy. “You can well imagine how scary it was. I tried a bit, apprehension of failure overpowering me initially. Gradually with the fear psychosis disappearing, I began to enjoy the dance. Having picked up the skills of Ranapa, I was soon initiated into Chadheiya, then Paika, followed by Ghoomura.”

The other dances like Laudi, Binakar, Dasabhujia too had to be imbibed. Of all the musical instruments indispensable in the performances of the folk dances, the ‘dhol’ occupies pride of

place. So Krishnama Reddy began training in this instrument with gusto. Little did he imagine that years later, he would replace his mentor as the major 'dhol' player of the troupe. Krishnama Reddy's extraordinary association of four decades with the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra elicits interesting anecdotes, "Once in the early seventies, we left for a seven-day programme to Puri and Rourkela. Successful performances at Puri being over, we were heading for Rourkela in a van. It was a dark, hideous night on a ghat road. Suddenly it began to rain heavily. Eerie sounds, thunder and lightning added to our fears. Hardly did we go a bit further when both the tyres of the van got punctured. Stranded on an isolated ghat road in a jungle, trapped inside a van for about 12 hours without food and water, you can well imagine the plight of us 14-15 year old of the troupe. When the rain receded, some of us walked for 5 km to get some foodstuff. But all we managed to get hold of was some 'muri' or puffed rice. In the meantime, the tyres were replaced and we rushed ahead to Rourkela where sadly, we were too late to participate in all the five scheduled programmes. However, we could perform at only one programme. Guruji felt awfully humiliated by this harrowing experience. This was perhaps the only time, he had to bite the dust in his exemplary artistic career. That too for no fault of his !"

Hailing from peasant families, the swarthy boys at Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra too worked part-time in the fields, lending their services to their family occupation. Bhagaban, the school dropout who till his end, regretted his inability to continue his education encouraged his sons to study wholeheartedly and respect their teachers. As a retributive measure, perhaps, Bhagaban founded an institution in Narendrapur for training children in ethical values. Known as the 'Nursery School-cum-Ethical Centre', the school imparted

disciplinary education with emphasis on moral values and proper code of conduct. The experiment, that targeted the neoliterate, semi-literate and school dropouts of the peripheral areas of Narendrapur gradually grew in stature as enrolment picked up. This school flourished for some years. A few years later, with the deterioration in the health of the founder, the school however, was closed.

Organised by the North Central Zone Cultural Centre, Allahabad, the three-day 'Sharadotsāv' at Jaipur from October 24 to 26, 1988 gave a clarion call to all connoisseurs of both classical and folk dance and music. If melodious voices belted out 'thumri' and 'dadra' numbers, pahadi folk and bhajans too equally rent the air at the Ravindra Manch's open-air theatre. While a solo Bharatnatyam performance enthused the audience, an ensemble from a predominantly tribal district held the audience spellbound with their magnificent 'Chau' dance.

The audience then suddenly sat up to a different tune altogether. Simanchal Raul's spiritual notes on the conch shell known as Sankhadhwani transported them into a tranquil, ethereal world. Then followed, one after another, the momentous group dances of Ghoomura, Ranapa and Chadheiya choreographed by Bhagaban Sahu. The artistes of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra danced in sync, sending the viewers into raptures. The deafening applause for these scintillating folk dances reflected the unrestrained ecstasy of the audience. The sheer magic conjured up by the 'Sharadotsav' lingered on in the minds of not just the audience but also the performing artistes for a long time. Sahu's troupe continued their tour and performed at other venues like Sriganganagar, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Alwar and Jaisalmer in folk-tradition-enriched Rajasthan and left an imprint of their own traditions in those parts.

If Bhagaban Sahu was a volcano of talent and a powerhouse of energy, it was left to organisations like the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the cultural zones of the country and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, (ICCR) to tap his potential and place him in the front league of pioneering folk artistes of India.

Thankfully, the fragrance of the flower that blossomed in the remote village of Badakusasthali disseminated far and wide due to the exposure provided by patrons of art, be they individuals or organisations. Bereft of their unstinting support and encouragement, Bhagaban Sahu would, perhaps not have accomplished his mission of showcasing to the world the rich and varied folk dances of his region in Orissa. And that would have been a colossal loss not just to the intrepid pioneer but also the entire world of folk traditions.

Coupled with his immense potential, was a self-effacing naivete and an impeccable behaviour that exerted a magnetic pull on whosoever Bhagaban Sahu came in contact with.

Under the auspices of the ICCR, Bhagaban Sahu's ensemble scaled new heights in various African countries in 1988. Be it at Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Uganda or Tanzania, the veteran choreographer mesmerised the crowds with his repertoire of dances. The Africans, who themselves boast of very rich ethnic song and dance traditions sampled and savoured every moment of the swirling, synthesising gyrations and symmetrical steps of the group dancers.

Mumbai hosted the Apna Utsav in 1989. It was a gala affair with more than 500 folk dance troupes from all the seven zones of culture converging together to exhibit a pot-pourri of dances. Apart from seven other troupes from the State, Bhagaban Sahu's ensemble also represented Orissa at the Festival. Eminent film

actor and director, Amol Palekar and his wife Chitra Palekar, the co-ordinators of the concerts instantly established a wonderful rapport with Bhagaban Sahu. They attended the camp of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra on all the days and oversaw the rehearsal. Amol Palekar addressed Bhagaban reverentially either as 'guruji' or 'dadaji' and sought details about the dances he practised. One evening, when the actor stepped in unannounced, he found the 75 year old numero uno rehearsing fervently, at par with the young boys of his Kendra. So moved was Palekar by the sincerity and devotion of 'guruji' that he intervened and requested him to stop the rehearsal, "You are adept in your art and require little practice", he suggested gently, tapping him fondly on the back, "Take it easy and relax before the show." But Bhagaban's rejoinder, "I rehearse at home regularly. Why can't I do so now?" stumped him. Amol Palekar resignedly said, "Ok dadaji, please continue."

By virtue of their reputation and artistic appeal, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra got the privilege of exhibiting their talent on both the opening and the closing days of the festival.

Years later, when Amol Palekar came to Cuttack to attend the Children's Film Festival at the Jawharlal Nehru Indoor Stadium he summoned Bhagaban Sahu who willingly obliged. Sahu took 24 boys with him to perform at Cuttack.

Such was Bhagaban's charisma that he spontaneously forged enduring relationships with whomsoever he came in contact with. He once met the legendary actor Balraj Sahni at a dance festival where he was in the organising committee. The suave gentleman known for his histrionic skills was down with a fever and wasn't at all keen to watch the troupe from Orissa perform. However, a casual glimpse of the richly embellished

performers captured his fancy as he got totally immersed in the vibrant footwork, symmetrical steps and visual splendour of the folk dances. So ecstatic was Sahni by the end of the show that he embraced Bhagaban Sahu with his characteristic smile. It was the meeting of two great thespians.

With Sanjukta, it was a cordial relationship. Padmashree Sanjukta Panigrahy- the name synonymous with Odissi conjures up images of a graceful, divine danseuse in sculpturesque poses. Sanjukta Panigrahy and Bhagaban Sahu often exchanged notes on dance. To the famous Odissi dancer, Bhagaban was always 'Bhaina' or elder brother and the mutual admiration they shared was indeed remarkable. There were times when they performed at the same venue, she presenting Odissi and his troupe folk dances. Sadly Sanjukta's illness and subsequent death at a comparatively young age of 52 was something Bhagaban felt deeply sad about and could never reconcile with.

Jnanpith Award winner Sitakant Mahapatra was one person Bhagaban Sahu bumped into on many occasions. While rehearsing for the Republic Day celebrations on January 23rd 1995 at the Scout and Guide camp in Delhi, Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra as Secretary, Department of Culture, Government of India accompanied by a few other officials was to survey the rehearsals at the camp. In the biting cold of Delhi, when everybody else lay in bed covered with blankets from top to toe, Bhagaban carried his 'dhol' and began to practise earnestly. The uncanny stillness of the wintry evening with the Mughal Emperor's tomb in the background was broken by the loud beats of the drum. Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra rushed to Bhagaban. "At your age, I don't understand why you must practice so vigorously in this biting cold weather." Bhagaban, at 81, complained like a small child that only two days were left for the big day. "Yes,

that's why I'm requesting you to relax", urged Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra. With a triumphant smile, Bhagaban said, "Sir, once you are obsessed with dance, you tend to forget everything else, including the lowest possible temperatures. As regards rest, well, after 26th January, I can rest a lot. So, kindly let me rehearse right now."

Dr. Sitakant responded with a grin. "There's no stopping you. You seem to understand no other language but dance. So go ahead."

RECOGNITION OF OUTSTANDING MERIT

Even at 75, Bhagaban's vigour was matchless. Perhaps his feats at the circus had infused in him an everlasting vigour. His deep-rooted conviction in the benevolence and supremacy of God appeared to plod him on and on. Like an acrobat who never tires of walking on the tightrope, Bhagaban too was a livewire whose zest for living seemed infectious. His exploits on the cultural arena within the country and abroad transformed him from a small-time village boy to a legend. By virtue of his talent, he had blossomed into an institution by himself. Another major educational institution in the state, the Berhampur University honoured him as 'The Gifted Son of Orissa' on its Foundation day on 2nd January 1990.

For Sahu, an honour or recognition was nothing but an impetus, a challenge to forge ahead with redoubled vitality. If former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi witnessed their curtain-raiser show at the Republic Day ceremony in 1990, the following month his successor, Prime Minister V. P. Singh applauded their performance at Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata. If it was at the state capital, Bhubaneswar that the party performed in April, a few months later in November, it was at the country's capital during the New Delhi Trade Fair that they exhibited their art. The grand finale of that year's performance was at the District Industrial Fair at Berhampur when they performed in front of none other than the architect of modern Orissa, Biju Patnaik, Chief Minister of the State.

Under the aegis of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the East Zone Cultural Centre, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra performed at various venues of the country. At the B R. Ambedkar Birth Centenary celebrations at Nagpur in 1991 the troupe presented Ghoomura and Shankhadhwani besides its customary fare and at the end of the show, Bhagaban Sahu was honoured by the organisers.

These honours were but stepping stones to greater recognition. A communication arrived from Delhi in January 1992 that the Government of India had decided to honour Bhagaban Sahu with the prestigious Padmashree, a title given to civilians of outstanding merit. As the news spread, the entire village of 2,000 inhabitants grew euphoric.

Ecstatic shouts of joy rent the air as the whole atmosphere was surcharged with jubilation. That their 78 year old beloved patriarch, a true son of the soil had been bestowed such a unique honour, was a matter of pride for them. Given for exceptional distinction in any field by the government of India, the Padmashree awards are announced on the eve of the Republic Day. The Padmashree for his exceptional contribution to Indian cultural thus symbolised the zenith of his prolific career.

Bhagaban Sahu, landed in Delhi with his son, Rabindra Sahu to receive the Padmashree from the President of India, R. Venkataraman. Incidentally, another great guru, Guru Pankaj Charan Das under whom Bhagaban Sahu had trained in Odissi dance, too, was awarded with the Padmashree at the same glittering ceremony in New Delhi on 6 April, 1992.

To one and all Bhagaban reiterated that the award was a recognition not of him individually but of the elegance of the ancient folk arts of South Orissa. However, to those who followed

his track record, there was no doubt that he was the sole force who dedicated himself to revive those inert folk dances and popularise them.

Back home, a gala function to felicitate the doyen of folk dance and music was organised. The premier educational institution of South Orissa, Khallikote College and Ganjam Kala Parishad, an important cultural organisation devoted to promoting fine arts, too honoured him on his achievement. Congratulatory messages poured in from every nook and corner.

All this adulation and one more feather in the cap coming at the sunset of his life would probably have deterred somebody else to go ahead and smugly call it a day. But for Bhagaban, this recognition was just another of God's bountiful blessings. It meant he had to move on, accept the challenges and inspire his artistes to perform their best. Invitations to perform kept increasing and Bhagaban revelled in the fact that folk dances had ultimately got the recognition due to them.

Honoured with the 'Gajapati Samman' by the Utkal Parishad and felicitated by Falgu Sahitya Sansad, Berhampur, Utkal Pathak Sansad, Cuttack, Utkal Pathak Samaj, Kolkata, The Rose Festival Committee, Haryana, Patna Oriya Samaj, Bihar, Kala Vikash Kendra, Cuttack, Khallikote College Dramatic Association and by TISCO at the Gopalpur Beach Festival, Bhagaban Sahu continued with his work with missionary zeal.

As the icing on the cake, the East Zone Cultural Centre, Kolkata sponsored the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra troupe to Delhi from 5 to 27 January, 1993. The Department of Culture, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India organised a 4-day Republic Day Folk Dance Festival in the capital, with all the seven Zonal Cultural Centres being involved in it.

Thirty four motley troupes presented an exposition of a broad spectrum of folk dance performances from all over the country. Although folk dances had always been an integral part of the Republic Day pageant, the festival of 1993 highlighted the rich diversity of folk dances right from Bagstornches or the Ladakhi Marriage Dance of Jammu and Kashmir in the north to Moplah Kali and Vela Kali of Kerala in the south; from Rathwa and Siddi of Gujarat in the west to Pung Cholom of Manipur and Chheilam of Mizoram in the north-east. Besides, the exotic Ao Naga Dance of Nagaland, the Ghoomer of Rajasthan, Bihu of Assam, Bhangra of Punjab, Charkula and Chholiya of Uttar Pradesh, troupes from Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, West Bengal and Sikkim exhibited their traditional folk dances.

Bhagaban Sahu's troupe performed the tour de force Chadheiya group ensemble which is a part of the Danda Nata tradition of South Orissa. As was his forte, Bhagaban himself led from the front, playing on the 'dhol'. A few days later in February the South Zone Cultural Centre hosted a week-long dance festival at Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Sheelapriya, the Director of SZCC insisted that Bhagaban Sahu, the oldest veteran of the troupes assembled, alone should play the 'dhol' at the inaugural function. Approaching 80, Bhagaban Sahu with his vivacity and briskness, belied his age. With the 'dhol' dangling from his neck, hands playing the beats, he was transformed into an accomplished drummer, half his age. So bewitched by his verve and exuberance was Sheelapriya that she felt it would be an honour to the thespian as it would be a privilege to the audience.

Bhagaban Sahu was also called upon to conduct workshops in schools. As part of the Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti and the NCZCC's efforts to link artistic and creative activity with

education in school, Bhagaban Sahu conducted workshops on martial and folk arts like Paika and Ranapa at the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Surangi in Ganjam district of Orissa. To uphold the ideals of the Guru-Shishya tradition whereby the rich cultural heritage of the country could be preserved, the school children were trained by Sahu and his illustrious team. Ranapa or the stilt dance which requires a high sense of rhythm as well as a steadfast concentration akin to an acrobat's was taught to the students. The workshop, which provided an insight into the basics of Paika Nacha and Chadheiya was a highly appreciated experiment. Neeru Nanda, Director of the Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti had taken keen initiative to conduct these preliminary activities which would culminate at the National Integration Meet at Delhi's Kamani Auditorium on April 28-29, 1995. She had earlier met Bhagaban Sahu at the Martial Arts Dance Festival at Lucknow in November 1992 and was highly impressed by the tremendous contribution of the agile guru to the field of folk dance and music.

Talk of a tour and Bhagaban would, even after crossing eighty, be all fired up. Totally immersed in overseeing the preparations, Bhagaban would forget himself. Once in such a delirious state he almost tripped on the road. His left toe was badly hurt. So off he went to the village dispensary where the compounder dressed the wound, "Come again tomorrow, grandpa, I'll change the dressing", said Dhoba, the young compounder. With two days left to depart for the tour, Bhagaban lost himself in a reverie. So much so that the next morning as he bathed, the bandage got soaked and he threw it away. A few hours later, he went to the dispensary and got the dressing on his toe done. As he sat to have his dinner, wife Kautuki cribbed, "What is this, you seem to be behaving like a child. If yesterday you'd hurt your left



Chadheiya dancers leaping up in air during their exuberant performance



Laudi folk dance performance by the dancers of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra



Bhagaban Sahu with his 'dhol' during a Chadheiya dance performance



President R. Venkataraman honouring Bhagaban Sahu
with Padmashree in 1992



Bhagaban Sahu with wife Kautuki in 2000

foot, today you've broken your right one. How are you going to dance then ?” Only then did Bhagaban realise that his actual wound was left bare while the right toe was bandaged. Next morning, he rushed to Dhoba and blurted out whatever came to his mind. The jovial compounder had a hearty laugh and said humourously, “It was you who sat on the bench and showed me the right foot saying, ‘Hey Dhoba, quickly complete the dressing, I haven't much time’. So who's to be blamed ?”

January 1995 heralded ominous tidings for the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra, With the customary gusto and vigour, the troupe performed at the All India Folk Dance Festival of the Republic Day Pageant at New Delhi. For the first time, something strange had occurred during the show. Bhagaban Sahu felt a tremor in his veins as he played on the drum. To his utter shock and disbelief, he intently gazed at his hand. Yes, it seemed to shiver ! However, the octogenarian maestro decided to keep the matter under wraps. After all, the next hop to the Taj Festival at Agra was another significant destination to cover. As per the schedule, the festival was to commence in the morning with a 3 km parade by the participants. Although Bhagaban Sahu felt totally enervated by the bout of dysentery that he'd suffered the previous night, he walked the distance briskly, carrying and playing on his passionate 'dhol'. The signals were all too clear, “This will be my last performance”, disclosed Bhagaban to his favourite pupil and performer Bhagaban Patro. At 81, though the spirit was willing, the flesh was now weak. With the formidable reserves of brawn and vitality in his bodily resources, he garnered adequate strength to perform his favourite Chadheiya, Ranapa and other items. The programme over, Bhagaban felt his energy dissipating. He was badly sick and needed medical assistance.

His mind automatically went back to the Festival of India in

London where he'd met the dashing Rajiv Gandhi, the then M.P. and film star Shashi Kapoor. Soon after the Chadheiya performance, a smiling Rajiv complimented him and enquired about his age, "Sixty-eight", said Bhagaban, Both Rajiv Gandhi and Shashi Kapoor spoke, one after the other, "Another year or two of dance and then what ?" But very meekly, Bhagaban contradicted them, "No, I'll stretch it out a little longer, another 15 years, maybe," Almost stumped, Rajiv Gandhi and Shashi Kapoor looked at each other's faces with a dazed expression, and of course, a trace of lofty admiration. His words were almost prophetic. Thirteen long years had elapsed and he was still on his feet. Till 81, he'd always been as fit as a fiddle. Diagnosed with a rectum prolapse Bhagaban Sahu had a laparoscopy performed on him in Hyderabad, When he came around, Bhagaban's mind was in a turmoil. Would he be able to continue with his dance ? ? Playing on his favourite 'dhol' had become as indispensable as his regular breathing. Assailed by such misgivings, he prompted son Kishor to ask the doctor. The doctor advised the elderly patient to take rest for at least another 12 months, "What ! One year without dance", was the 81 year old's response as the bitter truth began to unfold in his consciousness. "Just ask if I can resume after 3 months", he nudged Kishor. But the doctor's rejoinder was an emphatic 'No'.

Never before in his life did Bhagaban Sahu feel so depressed. Dance was the be all and end all of his life. For a person who began to dance at 40, bidding adieu to it at 81 was more agonising. All his life, he lived, ate and drank dance and music. And now this poignant fate ! Perhaps God had willed it this way. It slowly began to dawn on him that his active, touring life was destined to come to an abrupt halt henceforth.

AUTUMN SONATA

Confining himself to his house and village, Bhagaban gradually regained his zest. During the time of his convalescence his constant friend Sahadebo Panigrahy remained at his side. Reading newspapers or recollecting times gone by, meeting the pupils, the days became sluggish for this devotee of dance. But whenever there would be dance performances in the village environs, he would never miss them for anything else. At the Kala Vikash Kendra, he passed on the reins to his youngest son Kishor, who besides being an accomplished dancer worked as a school teacher at the Narendrapur High School. Bhagaban realised that this son had it in him to continue his legacy. The ICCR sponsored an overseas cultural tour to Iraq, Syria and Jordan in September 1995. This was the first time, the Narendrapur Kendra troupe was travelling abroad without their Founder cum Secretary, “The Festival of Babylon which went on for ten days in Iraq was well-organised and we were extended a tumultuous welcome”, recalls Kishor Sahu. The kudos at Damascus and Jordan too was mind-blowing. On our return Nonna (father) would be all too impatient to listen to the myriad experiences of our tour.”

And then came a highly gratifying piece of news ! Padmashree Bhagaban Sahu had been conferred the state’s highest honour; The Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja Puraskar for the year 1994-1995. The award named eponymously after Southern Orissa’s greatest poet and literateur of the highest calibre Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja, was instituted in 1991 by the

Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi and presented to luminaries whose contributions in the field of music, dance, drama or films is beyond compare. The overall contribution of the immensely talented guru and performer Bhagaban Sahu in the field of folk dance and music made him the unanimous choice for the Kabi Samrat Upendra Bhanja Samman for 1994-1995. He thus joined the hallowed ranks of actor Samuel Sahu, Dr. Sunanda Patnaik, Hindustani vocalist, Odissi Guru Padmashree Pankaj Charan Das and eminent dramatist Karthik Ghosh. At the award presentation ceremony, on 3rd January 1996 in Bhubaneswar where ten other artists like veteran Oriya actor Sarat Pujari, Odissi dancer Madhavi Mudgal and others were felicitated. Padmashree Bhagaban Sahu was represented by his son Kishor Sahu who received the Samman citation and cash prize of Rs 25,000.

At the ripe age of 82 years, Bhagaban began to confine himself to his house. Though his relations with his sons were cordial throughout, the families began to live separately yet in close proximity. It was with the youngest son Kishor that Bhagaban and wife Kautuki began to live. Marriage with Kautuki, his dotting wife of six and a half decades had proved to be rocksteady, with her lending quiet support, always.

With the passing of days, Bhagaban sought contentment in listening to the exploits of the Kala Vikash troupe in different parts of the country and abroad. In March 1999, the ICCR sponsored the troupe's visit to Australia and New Zealand. Having performed immaculately to effusive audiences in different cities Down Under, the troupe moved on to the exotic locales of New Zealand to participate in the Festival of Asia. Artistes from China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and India performed in street festivals in 12 cities, at cultural programmes for schools in five metropolitan towns besides participating in competitions, business

forums and corporate functions. The Indian dancers from the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra, Orissa left an indelible stamp on the New Zealanders, the Stilt dance, Ranapa being the piece de resistance of the shows, “..... The participation of international troupes like the Orissa Stilt dancers lifts the Festival above the ordinary, giving it a magical quality-what can be described as the “wow !” factor. Were it not for the Festival of Asia, New Zealanders would never get the chance to see performers of the calibre of the Orissa troupe”, read a Festival of Asia report from Wellington.

The Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra took part in the Festival of Asia from 19-28 March 1999 performing in Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington. At the street festivals, densely packed crowds cheered enthusiastically as the Orissa troupe performed the Ranapa, Ghoomura, Paika, Dasabhuja or Tiger dance. About 1200 primary school students attended a special 3-day programme at Auckland’s ‘The Edge Performing Arts Centre’ where the Orissa troupe displayed their programmes. Pamela Barton of Asia 2000 wrote, “The students were fascinated by the Orissa group. They were full of questions about life in Orissa after each performance,” Be it at museums, or at the civic squares, the performers from Narendrapur, in their colourful attire were all over, wooing crowds everywhere. Wellington Festival organiser Dominique Mermoud-Smith documented his observation thus “The Orissa Percussion Dancers presented a unique performance that has never been seen in this part of the world; they captivated the crowds that gathered to see them.”

After the resounding success at various venues of New Zealand, the Kendra visited Malaysia for a brief stop-over, performed there and returned home to India, after a highly fulfilling tour. The colour pictures, brochures and anecdotes of the

tour as narrated by his favourite pupils thrilled Bhagaban to no end. After all, son Kishor was successfully carrying forward the mantle of fame his father had achieved during his time. At the fading twilight of his life, accolades seemed to be chasing Bhagaban still. The IMFA group's Indian Metals Charitable Trust conferred on him the prestigious Sarala Samman for his glorious achievements and lasting contribution to folk arts in Orissa. On 14 June 2000, the auspicious Raja Sankranti day, the 21st Sarala awards presentation ceremony took place at Soochana Bhawan in Bhubaneswar. Padma Sachdev, eminent Dogri Poet from Jammu and Kashmir and winner of the Sahitya Akademi award in 1991 was the Chief Guest who gave away the celebrated Sarala award. Padmashree Bhagaban Sahu and five other talented personalities who have enriched literature, music and dance were felicitated on this occasion. Since Bhagaban Sahu himself could not go personally to receive the honour, son Kishor went to the state capital and received the plaque on his behalf. However, in his message, Bhagaban Sahu stated his feelings thus :

‘My dear Art Lovers,

Having been involved in learning the performing arts from my tenth year onwards and later endeavouring to teach and popularise those art forms. I've been leading a retired life since 1995. Even at the advanced age of 86 years, I can not resist the temptation of going outside and watching dance performances in my village. My only ambition is that the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra which is an epitome of 46 long years of incessant practice, continues to live after me and succeeds in perpetuating the various folk art forms of Orissa for the benefit of posterity.

My happiness lies in making others happy. The loud sounds of applause that reverberated at the end of my shows always delighted me greatly. As a performer, I can confidently say that if

an artiste is devoted to his art, he can never go hungry as art is for art's sake.

For the past five years my son Kishor Kumar Sahu, a teacher by profession, has been at the helm of the Kala Vikash Kendra and taken the troupe to far-flung places like Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia where he has been highly appreciated.

It is only with the blessings of God and inspiration from connoisseurs of art like you that our Institution can continue to flourish. My fervent appeal to the Almighty is to shower His benevolence on everybody.'

The Sarala Samman of the year 2000 turned out to be the grand finale of the prestigious awards in Bhagaban Sahu's phenomenal kitty. Though this ardent devotee of Nataraj never courted awards, laurels came in quick succession, one after the other to transform him into one of the most decorated personalities of the state and country. Yet, this sublime embodiment of humility and self-effacement never let success go to his head. Altruism and munificence were as much the hallmarks of this down-to-earth persona as were compassion and naivete.

THE LEGEND LIVES ON

As he lay in his bed, his faculties retarding, Bhagaban Agrew more magnanimous, distributing most of his belongings to the needy. If anyone approached him for help, he never went back disappointed. At times it was rice, at others cash. Rare visits of influential persons or genuine patrons of art would bring back the sparkle in the icon's hazy eyes. Allusions to his dance and 'dhol' would enliven him and momentarily pump blood in his old, woebegone veins. Having weathered nearly 88 stormy years, he now lacked the strength to swim against the tide. His mental faculties too seemed to be abating.

Image after image floated in his mind as in a dream. The severed idol of Hanuman, the sage at the Kumbha Mela, the perilous motorcycle rides in the 'Maut-ka-Kuan', Pagla Baba, Pandit Nehru, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Marshal Tito, Indira Gandhi, Queen Elizabeth II, Margaret Thatcher, Dr. Fakhruddin Alt Ahmed and so on and so forth; each overlapping the other. Sounds of drumbeats, echoing conch shells, the medley of Panchvadya reverberated in his ears as did the thunderous applause at London's Coliseum Hall and Delhi's Republic Day pageants. Although his vision was impaired greatly, he could picture every frame of the Ranapa, Chadheiya, Dasabhuja or Bagha Nacha in his mind's eye distinctly.

In a state of dementia, he'd distributed all his dhotis, shirts and kurtas so much so that new sets of clothes had to be purchased for his daily wear. Bereft of all worldly possessions, this culturally

affluent man, became bed-ridden, waiting for the final reckoning. During all these trying times, his constant companion was Sahadebo Panigrahy. Bhagaban who'd grown rather reticent but pensive during the last days of decrepitude responded to his crony's small talk. Every day, morning and evening Sahadebo would sit by his bed and grow nostalgic. Sons, daughters-in-law, daughters and grandchildren and other kith and kin too never left him to himself. Always surrounded by family or elderly friends or pupils, Bhagaban seemed to hold on. His youngest son Kishor and daughter-in-law Indira left no stone unturned in caring for his upkeep. Wife Kautuki too had grown senescent at eighty-four.

In the morning on 12 August which happened to be a Monday, Bhagaban sent word to Sahadebo Panigrahy. With a thumping heart, Panigrahy rushed to Bhagaban's side, "Why did you send for me ?" asked Panigrahy, A smile of recognition crossed Bhagaban's face, "Do you want anything ?"

The beatific smile on the octogenarian's lips almost made him look like a saint.

"Tell me, your best pal, what you want", insisted Panigrahy.

Bhagaban looked at him intently and tried to say something, "Biscuits ?" asked the master. The Patient's eyes signalled a 'no', "Is it Kakara ?" smiled Panigrahy who knew his friend relished the sweetmeat.

Bhagaban gestured as if he wanted to eat it, "Okay, I'll get you a couple", promised Sahadebo Panigrahy and came out, tears clouding his eyes. Instead of asking his daughter-in-law to make it in the house, as was his wont, the master went to a shop and brought some sweet item as a substitute. He realised that time was at a premium and it would be a matter of minutes, moments only...

He managed to rush back to his ailing friend and fed him a small piece. Bhagaban ate it but didn't betray any feelings. The entire clan of near and dear ones was at his side, Gradually, Bhagaban drifted into unconsciousness. His final adieu from the stage of life came a few moments later at 11.40am on 12 August, 2002. As the long and fruitful innings of the old revered patriarch ended on the earth, the entire village of Badakusasthali mourned the irreparable loss of this exemplary son of the soil. Survived by wife Kautuki, and three sons and three daughters, the inimitable Bhagaban ultimately merged with the other-world Bhagawan.

Messages of condolence, with rich encomiums poured in from various organisations and individuals, while the local press put in a customary obituary. The common refrain was that but for Bhagaban Sahu's dedicated pioneering attempts, the diverse and hoary folk dances of Southern Orissa would have died a natural death long ago. At a time when film songs and dances were making deep inroads into the cultural realm, Bhagaban Sahu infused new life into the near extinct indigenous dance and music forms, placing them on a high pedestal.

Almost one and a half months after the demise of Padmashree Bhagaban Sahu, his eighty-ninth birth anniversary was celebrated on 21 September, 2002. A souvenir was brought out on this solemn occasion with befitting tributes being paid to the immortal dance exponent and guru who had, by the end of his 88-year earthly odyssey become an institution in himself. Bighneswar Sahu, Chief Editor of the Padmashree Bhagaban Sahu Smaranika Committee, a grandson by relation, opined that the modest Bhagaban Sahu was deprived of the media attention he'd rightfully deserved, A journalist by profession, Bighneswar, son of ex-MLA Biswanath Sahu recalls, "I took a detailed interview of Bhagaban Sahu in 1995 when he was

81. It was published in the Oriya magazine 'Bijaya'. In a career spanning more than four decades, when he was acknowledged a folk supremo, this was perhaps his first published interview. Clad in his archetypal knee-length *gamcha*, he grew visibly excited, so much so that he started screaming and running about, like a child, declaring to all and sundry that his exploits were narrated in 'Bijaya'.

With his excessive obsession for dance, he went on to become the quintessence of several folk dances native to Southern Orissa. When once asked how he could adapt these vibrating dances for the stage, his unassuming reply was, "I extract the basic concept and motif from folk traditions, add a few new innovations and give it variety."

How exactly do we classify this towering phenomenon called Bhagaban ? As a dancer, drummer, choreographer, researcher, teacher, or innovative genius ? There lies the problem. It is futile to categorise him. This versatile artiste with his irresistible desire to learn, experiment and excel carved a niche for himself on the cultural canvas of the country by virtue of his multifaceted talents.

When the time for making a choice arose, the alleged spiritual seeker opted for travelling on the path less-traversed, thus attaining dizzying heights and eternal glory. Born in a small, non-descript village, Badakusasthali and remaining rooted to it lifelong, this son of the soil, a school dropout, could rub shoulders with elite scholars, political heavyweights, heads of state and royal kings and queens owing to his indomitable will power and courage of conviction. His brain-child, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra, painstakingly nurtured over forty-eight long, eventful years to perpetuate the varied folk dances of the region is fortunately, alive and kicking. With Kishor Kumar Sahu, the gifted son of an

extraordinarily gifted father taking on the mantle, the Kendra has performed at various venues even after the departure of the founder. Be it the Lok Utsav at the state capital in October 2002, the Belabhumi Mahotsava, Surabhi (Beach Festival) at Gopalpur in December, the Shilpamela at Allahabad or the Lok Sanskrutt Ka Utsav at Santiniketan, the troupe lived up to the expectations of the spirited crowds. The services of the Paika Dancers of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra were utilized in the Hindi film 'Ashoka' which was shot extensively in Bhubaneswar and Rajasthan. The Kalinga War scenes depicted in the film made use of the innate talent of these very folk dancers. If the year 2002 ended on a highly satisfying note with sterling performances at the Ramoji Carnival at Ramoji Film City, Hyderabad, the year 2003 began with a fortnight long tour to New Delhi for the Republic Day Folk Dance Festival where President Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam was a very discerning viewer at the rehearsals. So overwhelmed was the deaf Simanchal Raul (a pioneer Shankhadhwani artiste of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra) by the affable President that he impulsively ran up to him and shook hands with him, much to the amusement of President Kalam and the other troupe members.

Performances of some selected dances from Bhagaban's oeuvre like Ghoomura, Paika, Ranapa, Chadheiya, Laudi, Bagha Nacha at Chandigarh, Santiniketan, Nagpur and Hyderabad continued unabated. On December 3, 2003 a 20-member troupe of the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra performed Ranapa, Shankhadhwani and Chadheiya at the 14th Konark Festival 2003. With the magnificent Konark temple as its backdrop in the wintry evening, the huge open-air auditorium packed to full galleries, the dancers in their red and ochre costumes and reverberating sounds, of the 'dhol', 'changu', 'mahuri' and 'shankh', entertained the

dance lovers from all parts of the country as well as the foreign tourists who'd converged there from different parts of the globe.

If for the Utkal Divas on April 1st 2004, the Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra artistes performed at the state capital, Bhubaneswar's Pradarshini ground, on November 22, the venue was the Pragati Maidan of the country's capital where the India International Trade Fair hosted the event. On the first three days of December 2004, the troupe performed at the Gramshree Mela Folk Dance Festival at Allahabad, The year 2005 began with admirable concerts at Etawah, U.P., on 12 and 13th January, continued with shows at the Central Rice Research Institute (CRRI), Cuttack and on October 22-23, 2005, the troupe performed in Rajasthan's Capital, Jaipur at the Nehru Kala Kendra, giving credence to the fact that Bhagaban Sahu's Narendrapur Kala Vikash Kendra is active even three years after him.

The artistes of the Kendra are extremely conscious of their rich legacy and of the indelible imprint left behind by the drummer, dance-researcher, teacher and choreographer par excellence on the cultural scenario of the country. They feel their guru who was a legend in his lifetime will remain immortal in the annals of folk art only if they continue to project his repertoire of folk dance forms at various fora in the country and abroad.

Bhagaban Sahu's relentless efforts to showcase the resuscitated folk dances of his region made him a revered icon, a cultural ambassador of Orissa's rich and diverse folk culture. And if he has left his footprints on the sands of time, it is upto succeeding generations to follow them, take a leaf out of his life and uphold his folk art traditions. To many an upcoming artistes, Bhagaban's saga of success evolving gradually, climbing one rung after the other to reach the pinnacle of glory is a profound source

of inspiration. Like Jonathan Livingstone Seagull, Richard Bach's inspiring bird, Bhagaban was almost ostracized for choosing to tread on unfamiliar terrain, off the beaten track. But with his immense talent, will-power, zeal and confidence, he could endeavour to soar high up in the skies and gain a mass following. Never a stereotype, the non-conformist and gutsy teacher had willing pupils who aspired to emulate him.

Equipped with a vision and unyielding tenacity, Bhagaban who dared to differ has shown many an erudite scholar the meaning of life. His voyage of self-discovery can best be quoted in his own words : "As far as my memory goes, I was in search of truth and the meaning of life. I realise that the various experiments and experiences of my life have broadened and enriched my present vocation. I guess this is the meaning of my life."

All in all, his was a life undoubtedly, well-lived to the hilt.

GLOSSARY

1. **Chaiti Ghoda:** A folk dance of fishermen celebrated for a month from full-moon of March (Chaitra) to the next full-moon in April (Baisakh) when the horse-headed deity Basuli is propitiated.
2. **Changu:** a small drum-like musical instrument in which cowhide is wound to a wooden frame and two sticks are used to beat the surface to produce rhythm.
3. **Chatasala:** Village Primary School.
4. **Dadra and Thumri:** Styles of light classical music compositions set to different beats in Hindustani music.
5. **Dalkhai:** A rhythmic folk dance basically of rural Sambalpur (in Western Orissa).
6. **Daskathia:** A folk ballet of Ganjam district where two persons, one chief singer (gayak) and the other (palia) narrate episodes from the epics in a sing-song fashion using a pair of wooden clappers.
7. **Dhol:** Drum
8. **Dhoti:** Lower garment or loin cloth worn by men.
9. **Devadasis:** Temple dancers who played an important role in all the rituals of Lord Jagannath.
10. **Ekadasi:** Eleventh day of either half of a lunar month, considered auspicious.
11. **Gamcha:** A cotton towel
12. **Grihast:** A householder

13. **Jhanja:** Cymbals
14. **Jhumar:** A tribal dance
15. **Kakara:** A traditional sweet pancake made of semolina or flour with a coconut stuffing.
16. **Kartik:** The most sacred month of the Hindus, October-November.
17. **Kela Keluni:** A dance performed by the 'Kela' community of Ganjam district where rope-walking and rhythmic acrobatic jumps are synchronised to the music of 'changu', flute etc.
18. **Kothi Sala Gahana Dance:** A folk dance performed during the entire month of Ashwin (September-October) to appease the village deity, A light form of amusement using a winnowing basket and earthen pot to produce melodious music.
19. **Mahuri:** Clarinet
20. **Maharis:** Temple dancers of Orissa.
21. **Moksha:** Salvation
22. **Natak Mandalis:** Theatre groups
23. **Nisan:** A musical instrument made of bamboo.
24. **Paika:** Also known as Padatiks, they were the peasant militia in the service of Gajapati Kings of Orissa.
25. **Prahalad Natak:** Based on the folk lore of Vishnu-devotee Prahalad, son of demon-king Hiranyakashipu, the high—strung performances and gorgeous costumes mark these presentations.
26. **Radha Premaleela:** The theme of these performances is

the divine romance of Radha and Krishna as portrayed in the Puranas.

27. **Raja Sankranti:** A 3-day swing festival, symbolic of the fertility of mother Earth is celebrated in May-June (Mithuna) by unmarried girls. It also marks the advent of the monsoons.
28. **Rasarkeli:** Folk dance centred around Sri Krishna and his mates and is widely performed in Western Orissa.
29. **Sankha:** Conchshell.
30. **Sankranti:** Transition of the Sun from one constellation to another. Considered an auspicious day.
31. **Veervadya:** A group dance of drummers which was meant to boost the morale of soldiers in the battle field as well as herald the arrival of kings for ceremonial functions.



Born in a remote village of Orissa, the versatile folk dance and music exponent Bhagaban Sahu danced into the heart of millions to become one of the cult figures of Indian culture. His single-minded devotion and indomitable will resuscitated rich tradition of folk-dances like Chadheiya, Ranapa, Ghoomura, Paika and many others. The author, in this biographical account, presents a vignette of the life of this maverick, one-man institution of Oriya folk culture. The book not only unfolds the doyen's life in the most captivating way but also makes a statement that the cultural firmament of India owes its radiance to the stars like Bhagaban Sahu.

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